

THE HISTORY OF HALO OPERATIONS VIETNAM 1970-1971

On the last day of 1969, a reconnaissance team from the top-secret Studies and Observations Group (SOG) was inserted by helicopter into a North Vietnamese staging ground in northeastern Cambodia known as Base Area 702. Enemy gunners were waiting, and shot them off both their primary and alternate landing zones. The next day, the same team walked into Laos from South Vietnam, only to run into another North Vietnamese force. They called for an extraction and were pulled out under heavy fire.

On 9 January 1970, another Recon team in the same area bumped into an enemy force near the end of an eight day mission. Two U.S. team members were killed during a running firefight and the rest were eventually extracted. A SOG Bright Light rescue team later recovered the bodies.

Running cross-border operations was always extremely dangerous, but by early 1970, the beginning of the U.S. military's twilight in Vietnam, they were getting worse. Nowhere was this truer than along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, where Command and Control North (CCN) - the Danang-based SOG reconnaissance and exploitation forces responsible for all of eastern Laos and the DMZ - faced thick North Vietnamese patrols and unprecedented amounts of anti-aircraft fire during infiltration and exfiltration. So heavy was the flack that enemy gunners had made several map grid squares all but impossible for helicopter insertions.

In response, SOG had groped for new methods of running the North Vietnamese gauntlet. One suggestion came from William "Billy" Waugh, a SOG Sergeant Major known for his daring and usually unorthodox schemes. He raised the possibility of using parachutes to gain entry into the hottest real estate the Ho Chi Minh Trail had to offer. More specifically, Waugh had a High-Altitude Low-Opening (HALO) freefall jump in mind.

While taking up the HALO idea, Waugh found a firm ally in Colonel Dan Shungel, the Special Forces officer perhaps best known for his role in the battle at Lang Vei near Khe Sanh in January, 1968. Since February 1970, Shungel had taken over as commander of SOG's Ground Studies Group, known as OP 35, which was responsible for reconnaissance missions into Laos, Cambodia and the DMZ. Billy recalls that Colonel Shungel literally put his military career at stake in order to get MACV to accept the concept of a HALO mission by selected SOG personnel. A freefall enthusiast after receiving HALO training during his prior posting at Fort Bragg, Shungel that summer brought over a trio of skydivers to quietly flesh out Waugh's concept. The first, Ray Henson, was an experienced HALO jumper who had been on the US Army's demonstration team. The second, Tony Appelton, had also amassed a considerable number of freefalls. The last, Melvin Hill, had been Shungel's HALO instructor. Of the three, only Hill had a previous SOG tour; the others had yet to run recon missions.

Once in country, Shungel's three parachutists were shunted off to temporary assignments until OP 35 was granted formal approval to begin a HALO program. For Hill and Henson, that meant desk slots at the Liaison Service - the South Vietnamese counterpart to Op 35 - where they assisted with an assortment of administrative duties. Appelton went to Ban Me Thuot to join Waugh, then serving as Sergeant Major for SOG's Command and Control South (CCS), which was responsible for cross border missions into Cambodia. For the time, Appelton was assigned to Recon Team (RT) PLANE, arguably one of the best teams on the CCS roster. Comprised of Rhade Montagnard tribesmen, PLANE had gained a solid reputation for achievements like bringing back not one, but four PAVN snatches on a single Cambodian foray (all subsequently died from wounds sustained in their capture). In July 1970, CCS closed down, and by August or September 1970, Waugh was asked by Shungel to take over Recon Company at CCN and continue recruiting for the HALO team.

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About a month later, Shungel and Waugh were given the green light to create their HALO team. First they yanked Appleton and Hill from their temporary assignments and directed them towards the OP 35 training compound (inter-compound) at Camp Long Thanh, just east of Saigon.

Next, the search began for indigenous volunteers. Appleton brought four, stripping RT PLANE of its best Rhade members, Tiak Bya-Ya, Noe Nie-Ya, Wak Nie-Ya, and Klu Bay-Ya. Three Vietnamese volunteers joined them, at the insistence of the Liaison Service.

The budding HALO team was completed when Staff Sergeant Cliff Newman and Sergeant First Class Sammy Hernandez volunteered. Newman was the One-Zero (team leader) for CCN's RT OHIO; Hernandez was RT OHIO's One-One (assistant team leader). Both had considerable hours running recon missions. Sammy came up from Project DELTA, a strategic reconnaissance operation in the northern half of South Vietnam that had closed earlier in the year. On their first mission together in Laos, the team hit a road crew and blew up a bulldozer that was repairing the trail. Cliff and Sammy both stated that they don't remember volunteering, but do remember that Waugh told them that he had a good deal for them. They also knew that Waugh wouldn't ask anyone to go on a mission that he wouldn't go on himself.

With selection complete, HALO training was set to begin. SOG, however, did not have a HALO school of its own. That, combined with a desire to keep the training a secret, led SOG headquarters to request that instruction take place on Okinawa under the auspices of the 1st Special Forces Group. The approval came immediately, and on 16 October 1970, the SOG HALO team, together with Billy Waugh, readied themselves to leave Long Thanh. Shungel dubbed the team RT FLORIDA, after his home state, and ordered Henson to lead the men through the airborne course. On their way to Okinawa on the C-130E, a liaison officer from SOG, a major who apparently hadn't been briefed very thoroughly, kept eyeing the HALO equipment and finally asked where the static lines were. The team explained that they were going a little higher and would not be using static lines.

On Okinawa, training took a toll on the freefall team. Klu Bya Ya, RT PLANE's M-79 man, landed in the water off Ishima Island on his first jump and promptly quit. All but one of the Vietnamese also dropped out. Most tragic of all was the death of Tony Appleton, who took his own life with a pistol over family problems. Prior to leaving Okinawa, the press had suspicions that Special Forces were training Montagnards and managed to take a long distance photograph of Hernandez wearing a bunny helmet and parachute harness. Evidently they thought Sammy was one of the Montagnards.

The Okinawa phase completed, what was left of RT FLORIDA returned to Long Thanh. There they practiced ground operations and did some night HALO jumps, attempting all the while to keep their HALO specialty a secret. Wok Nie Ya, PLANE's zero one, shot himself in the foot. During one of their training jumps into War Zone D, Waugh busted his ankle and had to drop out as a team member of the first HALO mission. On one of their early morning jumps near Long Thanh, the team missed the drop zone and were scattered over the aviation company's compound. The First Sergeant of the company had just awakened and stepped outside his orderly room only to be greeted by Sammy, who landed on the roof of the orderly room. The First Sergeant later stated, after he recovered from his heart attack, that he thought Sammy and the other jumpers were North Vietnamese invaders.

Up at CCN, meanwhile, Danang had already preceded its planned HALO mission with a low-level, static line jump. Chosen for the operation was RT ASP, once comprised of former North Vietnamese soldiers called hoi chanhs, but now thoroughly diluted with South Vietnamese recruits. ASP's One-Zero was Garret Robb, and he liked to run alone with his Vietnamese. For

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this particular mission, Robert Ramsey, a training sergeant, joined Robb with CCN's recon company, and two of his indigenous team members.

Shortly after midnight on 8 September, RT ASP chuted up for their low-level parachute insertion into a region on the map known as Target Gridsquare Echo, just west of the Demilitarized Zone. They were set to jump at 400 feet from a C-130E Combat Talon. None of the four wore reserve chutes. As Robb remembers it, "We exited the plane at 0400 hours, and dropped short near a North Vietnamese basecamp. We were below a ridge, while the North Vietnamese were up along the ridge. They started looking for us at daybreak. We managed to call in a few air strikes before a Huey from Quang Tri picked us up at 1000 hours."

With ASP's successful recovery as precedent, CCN made final preparations for RT FLORIDA's freefall. By that time, the team was reduced to six: Hill, Newman, Hernandez, Tiak B-ya, No Nie and a Vietnamese warrant officer named Thao. From these six, Hill was senior man and would be FLORIDA's team leader.

FLORIDA's jump would be the first combat HALO in the history of the U.S. Army, so SOG wanted the best equipment possible. Unfortunately, there was not much in the military inventory that fit the bill, leaving the team little alternative except to improvise. To help, Master Sergeant Frank Norbury, one of the most respected freefall instructors at Fort Bragg, was dispatched to Long Thanh to lend his assistance. Together with another freefall specialist, Master Sergeant Harry Denny, he created the Norden Light: an illumination device (rigged from a light-wand used in air traffic control on the ground) fixed to the back of the main parachute pack tray. A second Norden Light was attached to the top of the canopy at the apex. The Norden Light was connected to the power source by commo wire (WD-1), which ran down the suspension line to the power source under the reserve parachute. Two toggle switches were used to turn the lights on and off. One was carried in the palm during freefall and the other was mounted on the reserve parachute. However the Norden Light would not be used by RT FLORIDA on the first jump, as there were still some flaws with the commo wire breaking when the parachute was deployed. Cliff used a VS-17 panel under the bungee bands on the backpack of the parachute on their training jumps.

More improvisations followed. The parachutes were standard T-10, modified to a 7-gore TU to improve maneuverability. For timing devices - which automatically deployed the main chute at a designated altitude should the parachutist fail to do so - SOG procured Czech-made KAP III timers, which were far more reliable than the standard U.S. alternative. Also procured was Tierra Spray (it has since been deemed a biohazard), a green fluorescent mixture that, when coated on a freefall team, would allow them to see each other while falling through the darkness. It actually didn't work that well. Finally, the CIA loaned a homing beacon to be carried by Newman. Each team member would carry a transistor radio which, when tuned to the right frequency, allowed them to converge on Newman on the ground.

By the third of November, RT FLORIDA was ready. As the team gathered at the CCN isolation area in Danang, however, US intelligence sources began to suspect that the mission was already compromised and the mission was postponed a couple of days. Again, signs pointed towards compromise and the mission was postponed for several more days. This time, a radio intercept showed that the North Vietnamese not only knew of the mission and the drop zone coordinates, but also the names of everyone in RT FLORIDA, to include Billy Waugh, who wasn't jumping.

Faced with a serious leak in its operational security, OP 35 was forced to change drop zones. The new target was 40 kilometers south of Khe Sanh and 15 kilometers inside the Laotain border. Although the region was rugged and sparsely populated, it was well known for its dense anti-

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aircraft protection. And if there were any doubts about North Vietnamese vigilance, they were dispelled when Hill made a visual reconnaissance of the area in a Nail OV-10, only to have the windshield shot out of the plane.

During the final week of November, RT FLORIDA again suited up to jump. This time, on the suspicion that the leak had occurred in Danang, the team assembled in Long Thanh. At 0200 hours on 28 November 1970, the six RT FLORIDA members filed aboard a C-130E Combat Talon Black Bird. Frank Norbury, recovering from malaria, got out of bed to act as jumpmaster. Heading north, the aircraft rose to 17,000 feet and crossed into Laos. Five minutes from drop-time, the team did its equipment check and found that the light on Hill's (the One-Zero) altimeter had burned out. This meant that he would not know when to deploy his chute. Improvising, Hill tried dousing the front of his body with Tierra Spray, but still could not get enough illumination to see the altimeter.

Unwilling to abort the mission, Hill and the rest of the team moved to the edge of the tail ramp. Employing Combat Skyspot, a navigational system using ground-based radar positions, the C-130E crew came up on the drop zone. With a hand signal from Norbury, RT Florida stepped off the ramp and into the night.

As he had practiced many times before, Newman would exit first, followed by the rest of the team. Within 2,000 feet, however, the team hit rain clouds and lost sight of each other. Hill, who could not see his altimeter, remembered from the team's weather briefing that the first of two cloud layers ended at 4,000 feet, at which time he began counting before pulling his ripcord. But he opened his chute too soon and drifted from the rest of the team.

Once on the ground, problems continued to mount. The drop zone turned out to be buried under six inches of water, and when Newman set up his homing device, it shorted out. Worse, the Combat Skyspot navigational system, supposedly highly accurate, had put the team a dozen kilometers off its intended target.

Separated on the ground, in enemy territory, with poor weather closing in, and without maps of the area, RT FLORIDA's members focused on staying alive. Climbing an adjacent hill burned away by a lighting strike, Newman ran into Tiak Bya-Ya (now living in Hope Mills, NC), one of the two Rhade on the team, and the two tried to raise a Covey Forward Air Control (FAC) plane on the radio. The other Rhade, No Nie-Ya, managed to link up with the Vietnamese warrant officer. Hill and Hernandez were both alone. This was not the first or last time that Hernandez would find himself alone in the enemy's backyard.

A search was immediately launched for the missing team. Looking in the wrong vicinity, however, it took three days before a Covey (Al Mosiello, flown by Jim Latham, later a POW and Commander of the Thunderbirds) finally broke through the clouds and made visual contact with Newman. The team members were glad to see friendly aircraft, but it also alerted the North Vietnamese to the presence of a SOG team. Enemy patrols approached, forcing RT FLORIDA to call in repeated A-1 Skyraider strikes from Nakhon Phanom, Thailand.

Two days of poor weather kept rescue aircraft on the ground. It was not until 2 December that a pair of CH-53 helicopters attempted an exfiltration. Hill recalls that the team had chosen to use the URC-10 survival radios, as their prime means of communications. This later proved to be a saving grace decision. Hill's radio was soaked enough that he lost voice communications. Al Mosiello, an old radio operator, was able to remain in contact with Hill by Hill sending CW (Morse Code) to the Covey. Mosiello responded, and relaying to Newman by voice to maintain intra-team communications. Newman then provided team directions and intentions to the Covey.

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Rendezvousing with the orbiting Covey, the choppers headed for four separate pick-up locations to collect the men. While retrieving Hill on a jungle penetrator, small arms fire rang out from the triple canopy, hitting Hill in the right shin with a spent round. The other lifts were completed without incident and returned to NKP Thailand.

RT FLORIDA proved that HALO could be used to get a team in and out alive. SOG concluded that, as a means of entry this technique was considered proven, since an active enemy search was not made to locate the team. Better yet, nobody was killed, so Shungel and Waugh continued to expand their pet project. By the beginning of 1971, Frank Norbury, assisted by Harry Denny, Cliff Newman, Melvin Hill, George Zacker, and a handful of other HALO specialists, had established a freefall course at Long Thanh and began training a mixed class of Americans and South Vietnamese.

Cliff Newman remembers another humorous antidote that took place when the school was set up. Colonel Shungel wanted to make a jump. Cliff spotted the C-130 from 12,500 feet. As Cliff did a standing landing in front of the PIO people from Saigon, Colonel Shungel went into the woods. When they made contact with him by radio, Cliff clearly remembers the transmission: "Tell Newman to assume the position of attention and do not leave the drop zone!" Cliff recalls, "I figured I had my second butt-chewing coming from him." (The first had been when Cliff took his team members to Saigon prior to the first insert for a night of partying.) "After Shungel went into the woods, Melvin gave me a rotten carrot to improve my eyesight."

After a dozen more students were trained, a decision was made in the late spring to form a second HALO team. Billy Waugh, the recon company Sergeant Major at CCN, decided to have just four Americans on the team. Because on the previous jump, considerable time had been wasted trying to assemble on the ground. This time each member was to be equipped with two radios to continue his mission independently if necessary. Chosen as team leader was Captain Larry Manes, who headed CCN's recon company and had been a freefall instructor at Long Thanh earlier that year. Three others, Specialist Six Noel Gast, Staff Sergeant Robert Castillo, and Sergeant John "Spider" Trantanella were from the HALO-qualified RT IDAHO. Sergeant First Class Charles Wesley, from Recon Company was the standby jumper, but was called on emergency leave the night before the jump. Sergeant Jesse Campbell would now be the stand by jumper.

During the pre-dawn hours of 7 May 1971, Captain Manes's team moved to Danang airfield and boarded a C-130E. By this time, restrictions leveled against SOG prevented Americans from entering Laos, so their target was a new North Vietnamese supply trail just inside the South Vietnamese border midway between the Ashau Valley and Khe Sanh. At 18,500 feet, the team jumped in pairs. Manes, with a Ranger Eye Panel (illuminates tape) attached to the back of the parachute container, and Gast, covered with Tierra Spray, exited first. Murphy's Law quickly intervened. Gast, who had armed his toe poppers, landed hard on his rucksack causing one of the mines to detonate and wounding Gast in the buttocks (earning himself the nickname Half-Assed Gast).

John (Spider) Trantanella remembered the jump this way. "We used supplemental oxygen by breathing off the oxygen hoses from the console until told to standby. We did not have oxygen masks that were used for normal HALO jumps. Robert and I exited the ramp holding onto each other. I remember I was inverted and my KAP-3 activated around 4,000 feet. There was valley fog and I could not see the ground, but trees protruded through the fog. After checking my canopy, I looked around and saw a canopy about 50 to 100 feet below and to my front. I kept my eyes on the canopy following his moves. He was losing altitude faster than I, as he penetrated the ground fog, I took a last bearing on his position. All of a sudden, there was a flash, as if a hand grenade

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went off. Thinking that the North Vietnamese had spotted us, I immediately turned away from the flash. As I entered the fog, I pulled down on the rear risers preparing to land. When I regained my composure (breath) I cut myself free from the harness and parachute. Since it was BMNT, I could not see anything but high weeds and shrubs. I started crawling towards the area I presumed was the flash. I came across several makeshift huts. Still moving, I heard nothing but calm.â

âAs it started to get light, I saw what appeared to be movement behind a fallen tree. A semi-bald head was moving a little then stopped. I aimed my CAR-15 at the head, then made a noise. Noel looked up. I was happy to see him. I jumped over to his position, then to my surprise I saw his rucksack blown to pieces, and his pants were burnt off from the buttocks to his boots. He was in semi-shock, and his color was dead gray. He asked me how he looked, and I responded not bad considering we were both on the ground alive and separated from the others. Noel was bleeding. I took my shirt off and wrapped it around his butt, sort of like a diaper to stop the bleeding. When the sun came up, I heard the sound of our COVEY. It was Sergeant First Class Dave Chaney flying out of Quang Tri, CCNâs Mobile Launch Team 2. I grabbed my survival radio and came up on the radio. I gave him our situation, explaining that Noel was hurt bad, and needed an extraction.â

âWe moved to an area away from the explosion, but Noel couldnât move far. A few hours passed and the sound of helicopters coming up the valley could be heard. During that time I observed some movement about fifty feet away. I did not recognize it, but I believe it was Manes or Castillo, but we stayed hid. I directed the UH1-H to our location. The chase medic was Robert Woodham. He threw out a single string for Gast. With his injuries I knew that he could not be stabo rigged out without damage to his butt and legs. I waved my arms to throw another stabo. I hooked Noel in, and then myself. I let Noel ride over my shoulder to take up some of the pressure. We rode beneath the helicopter for about twenty minutes. They set us down at a deserted fire base. Then we boarded the helicopter. Noel was in enormous pain. I was limping on my left side, hurt from the jump, or from Noel ridding on my shoulder during the flight to the fire base.â

Nearby, Manes had settled in a streambed. After hearing choppers come overhead at first light, he waited two more hours before breaking radio silence to contact Covey. Told that Gast and Trantanella had been extracted, Manes was asked if he wanted directions to link up with Castillo. Not wanting to attract more attention with orbiting aircraft, he opted to continue the mission independently, as trained. With the enemy apparently unaware of their presence, Manes and Castillo paralleled each other while observing enemy positions along the road for four more days before being extracted without incident.

Robert Castillo recounts the events leading up to and during the mission. The insertion took place during the early morning hours of 7 May 1971. âDuring the early evening of 6 May 1971, we moved from CCN to the Danang Air Base. At the base, we rested and checked our equipment and went over the plans for the last time. It was during this time that we realized we had not jumped the M-14 mine. Noel Gast elected to arm his by inserting the striker. The rest of us would arm them sometime after insertion. We were all carrying six mines. I put the mines in one side pocket of the jungle rucksack, and the strikers, wrapped in a sock, in the other side pocket. We chuted up near the tailgate of the C-130E Blackbird, except for Captain Manes, because his main chute would not be ready for him until just before drop time. Once chuted up, we climbed aboard and took off in route to the DZ.â

âOn board the aircraft were Frank Norbury, the static jumpmaster, and a few other prominent onlookers. I believe the commander of SOG was on board too. Our assembly plan was to exit the aircraft in pairs and once at opening altitude, separate, open, and to assemble on Larry Manes by following him to the ground. To accomplish this we had SFC Frank Norbury sew a large Ranger Eye Panel (illuminus tape) on the top of CPT Manes' main chute. The main parachute container

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was left open and the top of the main with the Ranger Eye panel was left exposed. The parachute was placed under the same type of tin container that new T-10 parachutes being delivered to the Army were packed. A hole was cut in the top of the tin container and a jeep headlight was fitted through it and a 12-volt car battery was used to power the jeep headlight. The headlight was switched on approximately 30 minutes out, thereby allowing time to fully charge the panel and to give CPT Manes just enough time to chute up and exit before the panel began to lose its luminescent charge that we would need to see him clearly for assembly.

Tierra Spray was also used, which would last approximately 15 minutes before fading out. We sprayed our backs with this stuff just prior to exit. This would help to keep track of each other during the freefall. It didn't work that great. The Navy at China Lake ammo bunker complex stores what remains of the product. It has since been deemed a biohazard. John Trantanella knows all the details pertaining to the current status of that particular item.

The parachutes were OD T-10's with a 7-cell TU modification. Upon opening on the insertion, I thought I had holes in my chute, but upon closer inspection I realized that they had given me an old chute with white patches on it. I guess someone knew they weren't getting this chute back and didn't want to waste the newer chutes.

An emergency let-down device was attached to the back of the main chute container, between the jumper and the main container. It was constructed of 100 feet of 1-inch tubular nylon s-folded in a thin flat container. Upon landing in the trees, the idea was to attach one end of the line to the risers and then thread the line through a snap link on the main lift web, and after all was secure, cut away from the main and rappel to safety.

The jump took place at approximately one hour before daylight. The idea was in case someone became injured or the mission was compromised for some other reason, the Bright Light or MEDIVAC would not have to try and rescue us in the darkness. The last darkness infil would also leave us exposed to enemy pressure, for a minimal amount time before help could arrive.

The C-130E was to fly a normal supply route and as we neared the DZ an OV-10 was to fly over the intended DZ at a much lower altitude to positively identify the DZ. Once over the DZ and in radar range of the C-130E, the OV-10 pilot indicated that to the C-130E and they took a radar fix on the OV-10 and that data was entered into the aircraft's calculations for the release.

Once over the DZ and a combination of a thumbs up from Frank Norbury and the green light, we exited and I got to watch Sergeant John Trantanella's smiling face for the next 70 seconds. His eyes were rather large and his moustache was blowing all over. During the freefall, we made a few slow turns, but by any standard, it was a controlled and stable fall. I was not able to keep CPT Manes and SP6 Gast in sight 100% of the time during the descent, but I had a fix on them, and after opening, began steering toward them. I believe we missed our intended opening and landing point by a good distance and thus opened up over terrain that was higher than we had expected. Therefore, we ran out of altitude before we could assemble under canopy. As I was steering toward the group, I noticed the ground coming up and realized I was over trees and turned to run down the tree line looking for some place to land. As I was heading down hill, I heard a very rapid set of explosions and figured that someone had landed in and among the bad guys. Shortly thereafter I ran out of altitude and suitable landing spots and went down through the trees and landed on the ground sloping downward. I got out of my parachute gear and took a quick check around, heard nothing, saw nothing. I then gathered up my chute and other gear that I would leave behind, stuffed it into the kit bag, shoved the bag under some thick brush, and set out to attempt to find the others. I was not able to reach anybody on the radio and continued my

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slow and careful movement across slope in the general direction of where I last saw my teammates and had heard the explosion.â

âDaylight broke and I heard the Covey and helicopters, and finally began to realize what had happened. I could monitor the aircraft side of the conversations between my teammates and the aircraft. As I listened, I realized that Gast had landed on his rucksack and the M-14 mines had detonated causing major injury to his butt. Trantanella had landed close by and was able to aid and assist him, and was extracted with SP6 Gast shortly thereafter. I then heard Covey ask Manes if he could continue mission and he replied that he could. Covey then asked me if I could continue and I also said yes. We could each hear the Coveyâs part of the conversation with the other, but we could not communicate directly with each other. I did not know then just how far apart we were from each other, but with all the commotion that had just taken place around where John and Gast had landed and been extracted from, I believe neither one of us wanted to go wandering anywhere near that area.â

For the next five days, Manes and Castillo continued on an area reconnaissance. Although they had no plan or training to continue the mission in the event they became separated, they did. The next five days were uneventful in that they were extracted in one piece. While Castillo came across vacated campsites, graves, trails and heard what sounded like units doing weapons training, he stayed in the brush, moved slowly and listened to every little sound very carefully. At night, he would climb in the nastiest thicket he could find and put his back to a tree, lay his CAR-15 against his shoulder and the 22 High-Standard silenced pistol across his lap, and hoped for the best. Staying awake was a real problem. During the middle of the third night, what Castillo believed to be a tiger, began to close in on his RON site. As he/she got closer and the snorting and sniffing was what Castillo judged to be just a few feet away from his own feet, he emptied his 22 High-Standard slowly but surely. At first, it seemed to keep coming and Castillo thought he was about to be a tiger meal, but as he continued to fire, it gave out a few loud snorts and thrashed about and took off. Castillo reloaded and waited, but it never returned. It was so dark that he never got a look at it. Castillo said it was big and loud! You had to be there.

SOG considered this a successful mission and worth doing again. The key to success here was that the mission did not require that each and every man be present and operational in order to complete the mission. On the fifth day, Larry Manes and Robert Castillo were extracted and flown back to Quang Tri.

Once again, SOG considered the HALO mission a partial success and began planning a third freefall, again to be a four-man, All-American team. By this time, several important lessons had been learned. First, jumps should occur no more than two hours before daybreak; that way if a jumper was injured, he would have to wait only two hours before a helicopter extraction could be launched. Second, having team members operate alone was far more realistic than attempting to assemble on the ground.

As selection commenced for the third team, Staff Sergeant Andre Smith and 19 year old Sergeant Jesse Campbell (Babyson), both running recon in CCN, were quick to grab slots. Sergeant Madison Strohle, who had operated in CCS and then came north to Danang when Ban MeThuot started scaling down in 1970, also landed a slot on the team. Heading them would be Billy Waugh, now serving as Sergeant Major for CCNâs recon company.

Assembled at Long Thanh, the four parachutists continued with night practice jumps into the Iron Triangle west of Long Thanh. On one of their final jumps, the team landed hard. Strohle bruised his heel but elected to remain. Andre Smith, designated the assemblyman, seriously hurt his back and was forced to drop out. Sergeant First Class James Bath (Tub), who was straphanging with

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the team for the hell of it, was chosen by Waugh to replace Smith. James had multiple SOG tours.

Declared mission ready, the team was given their target: easternmost Quang Nam Province, six kilometers from the Laotian border. Earlier, Jim Bath had acquired aerial infrared imagery photographs of the target area from the U.S. Air Force. These photographs showed multiple hot spots (camp fires). SOG, told to investigate, had inserted a recon team, only to extract them 45 minutes later in the face of fierce enemy resistance. A second team was shot off their landing zone.

In the hope that a HALO team would have a better chance of infiltrating undetected, Waugh's men planned to attract minimal attention by staging from Danang aboard a C-130E that flew a supply shuttle every night to Thailand. On their first planned insertion, however, bad weather was reported and the team did not board. For their second try, the team loaded into the plane and overflew the drop zone, only to have the jump aborted to heavy cloud cover.

After two false starts, the team stood down for a week and a half. Sergeant First Class Charles Wesley again found himself assigned to a team as stand-by jumper. "The adrenaline high that we experienced earlier," recalled Bath, "was now starting to turn to doubt." Bath told Wesley the day before the jump that he had a bad feeling about this one, and Wesley jokingly told Bath, "If you chicken out I'll shoot you." The four jumpers continued to prepare for a third attempt.

During the pre-dawn hours of 22 June 1971, the team tried again. The C-130E took off and headed east over the Gulf of Tonkin for about 30 minutes, then turned back west towards Laos. While climbing to 19,500 feet Waugh looked at Wesley and said, "If you really want to be a bad ass you'll jump anyway." Wesley had a few choice words for Billy; he grinned and looked straight at Bath, again jokingly, pointed to his .22 cal high standard with silencer and smiled at Bath. As the C-130E neared the border at 19,500 feet they got the thumbs up from CPT Larry Manes, the static jumpmaster, and the green light to go. Bath, the low man, stepped into the void. Once clear of the slipstream, he keyed the switch in his hand, turning on the Norden Light fixed to his pack tray. The other three fell above as they passed through a layer of rain clouds.

As he came up on the right altitude to deploy his chute, Bath blinked his Norden Light to signal the rest of the team. When he pulled the ripcord, however, the combined shock from his bodyweight and heavy gear overstressed the main canopy, ripping out a panel as it opened and pulled out the wire leading to the second Norden Light sewn on top of the canopy near the apex.

Looking up, Bath could see the other jumpers drifting apart as they searched the sky for their assemblyman. Bath could do nothing; his damaged chute would not respond when he pulled the steering toggles. Falling fast, he debated whether he should deploy his reserve. Electing to stay with his main canopy, Bath slammed into a tree on the side of a steep ridge, wearing only jungle fatigues and a soft horse-skin HALO bunny helmet. (Smoke jumpers coveralls, used by SOG's Airborne Studies Group until 1967, were no longer in the SOG inventory). Bath severely injured his left leg and back. He also suffered cuts across his face. In his words, "I took out a metascope (night-vision device) and looked around. All I could see were green leaves, so I figured I was safe for the time. I then took out a small emergency radio (URC-10) and tried to raise the other team members. There was no answer from Waugh or Campbell, but Strohleim answered right away."

After the C-130E returned to Danang Air Base, Manes and Wesley went straight to the TOC at CCN. There they heard Covey talking with different jumpers on the ground and new that something had gone wrong again.

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Separated from Bath by a small karst formation, Strohlein reported that he was suspended in a tree with a broken left arm. With this injury, he was unable to remove himself from his harness and slide to the ground with the nylon-lowering device they all carried. By daybreak, Staff Sergeant Leslie Chapman, the Covey rider for that day, was overhead trying to find the two injured team members. Bath was able to give him his precise fix and a Huey darted in. Sergeant Lemuel McGlothren, the One-Zero of RT HABU and Sergeant Woodham (CCN Chase Medic) rappelled in on top of Bath to help with his injuries and get him out. McGlothren's CAR-15 was left in the Huey. As he was climbing out on the strut of the Huey, the sling broke and McGlothren rappelled without his weapon. Bath was extracted by STABO rig, then McGlothren and Woodham on the next Huey.

Strohlein, confused by the multitude of aircraft in the vicinity, had trouble relaying his exact location. One Huey would have located Strohlein, if the pilot hadn't mistaken Strohlein's pen-flair for a tracer round and turned away. Strohlein remained on the air until 1100 hours, then reported North Vietnamese moving in. After that, transmission ceased. Campbell, hiding in the thick underbrush, saw three NVA approaching, looked at the canopy hanging in the trees, then moved in the direction of the Huey that was trying to locate Strohlein. Campbell spent the rest of the time running and hiding from other NVA until he was extracted by STABO. Campbell recounts the events: "At 19,500 feet the tail ramp was lowered, all I could see was blowing rain and darkness. I figured it would again be aborted. Hell! The light went green and I waddled to the rear with the rest and fell off the ramp. After my exit, I could not get a visual on Bath and never saw anyone else."

"At opening altitude I pulled my main and felt the opening shock and assumed my canopy was good, but could not see well enough to verify. I hung around until I crashed through the jungle canopy and stopped. Still pitch black, I was just hanging there; couldn't see my own hands much less anything else. Through feel I hooked up the repelling line, released both risers and headed down. When I reached the end of the lowering line my feet still were not on the ground, so I hung there and listened for a bit. It was so dark and I didn't want to hang around. Pucker factor was rising, so I cut the line and dropped ten or twenty feet to the ground."

"After it got light enough to see I moved uphill until I heard voices and noise in the brush. I hid as three NVA passed above me in the direction of where my chute was in the trees. I don't know who heard me whispering on the radio, I only know he was very perceptive and was trying to get me out. I could hear the helicopters and Covey aircraft, but could not see them. Then I saw a helicopter through the trees and I told Covey that the helicopter was off to my right and I was on the side of the hill. Covey told me that the helicopter could not drop the STABO there for me, and for me to move down the hill to an opening in the trees. I ran down the hill to the open spot and was extracted by STABO. When I was sent home for discharge, I was told to forget all that we did and who I knew. So, I went home and adjusted to a normal life, if there is such a thing after that! Waugh called in numerous air strikes and was extracted the next day by orders from SOG."

As McGlothren and Woodham were being extracted, the rest of RT HABU prepared for a rescue mission to locate Strohlein. The team consisted of Sergeant Nick Brokhausen (the teams One-One) and beefed up with Sergeants Dave Daugherty, Cooke, Wagy and Karczewski, along with two of their yards. The team inserted by ladder in tall elephant grass and began working their way off the LZ in the direction given them by Covey towards Strohlein's location. As soon as the team cleared the LZ, they heard signal shots, which meant they were spotted by LZ watchers. The team had moved four hundred meters up the ridge when Covey informed them that they should be right on top of Strohlein.

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Sergeant Daugherty left Sergeants Cooke and Wagy with the bulk of the team and moved to the southeast with one yard. Sergeant Brokhausen, with Karczewski and two Bru, moved to the east. They were searching the ground and looking up in the trees. Brokhausen hadnât gone a hundred meters when he spotted Strohleinâs CAR-15 and M-203 lying in the dead leaves at the base of a tree. There were signs that the chute had been pulled from the tree. And you could see where AK-47 rounds had torn into the tree. Expended 5.56 and 40mm casings were found at the base. The CAR-15 had a bullet scar gouged into the stock. No blood trail was found.

Sergeant Wagy found the metascope, and then Brokhausen and Cooke found the map and strobe light. The equipment wasnât dropped, but had been placed in a straight line. Daugherty said he heard people up on the ridge. They also could smell heat tabs. The team moved up towards the ridge to within two hundred meters of the top. They saw movement all along the top and figured they were being set up for an ambush, and decided to head back to the LZ.

The weather closed in, and they figured if they had to RON, they needed ground to fight from. The team moved into a thick clump of trees about one hundred and fifty meters from the LZ. Once in the thick trees they found trenches about six feet long and chest deep. The trenches had been lined with some kind of luminescent so at night they could be found. There was a high-speed trail that ran up to the ridgeline and it was well used. The team occupied the trenches and put out claymores, then requested a specter gunship to be on station for most of the night. Around 2100, hours the whistles and banging started above the team towards the ridgeline. The team could see the NVA coming down the ridge on line with flashlights every fifty meters. Amazingly the NVA flowed around the trenches and down the finger into the valley. They continued to search the area for the Bright Light team for most of the night. At first light, the team was extracted by CH-53 out of NKP. To this date, Sergeant Strohleinâs fate has never been determined.

One last and little known HALO mission was planned by CCN. Sergeant First Class Charles Wesley and three other US HALO members were sent to Camp Long Thanh to conduct mission training. Accompanying Wesley were Sergeants Robert Sinton, Chaffe and Reando. On June 26, 1971, the team started their mission training. By July 3, 1971, the team had made thirteen jumps. Wesley was the low man with the Norden Light. During the teamâs training, the light system proved to be very effective for assembly in the air and on the ground.

However, on their last jump, the team exited the C-130E two or three miles off the drop zone. Looking down, Wesley saw a light. Thinking that the ground party had turned on a light for the team, he steered his canopy towards it. Not recognizing any terrain features that resembled their drop zone, Wesley saw a cleared area and landed. The other team members landed close by. As Wesley was trying to untie the quick release that secured his CAR-15 to the main lift web of the parachute, he found that he had a square knot instead. Then he heard Vietnamese voices approaching. Looking around, he spotted ten or fifteen black clad figures all on line coming toward him. Thinking that they were Viet Cong, Wesley leveled his CAR-15, which was still attached to the parachute harness. He then realized that he had not turned off the canopy light prior to landing, and the black clad figures were walking straight towards him and the other team members. Wesley quickly turned out the light and the voices got even louder. Something was not right. If they were Viet Cong, they would have already started firing at the team. Wesley blinked the canopy light off and on a few times. Then he recognized them as being RFPFâs (Regional Forces/ Popular Forces) by the red scarf tied to their LBE. They were from a night ambush site and were curious of the light, which had an eerie green glow to it. An M-151 showed up with Ben Dennis at the wheel. âDonât blame me,â Wesley said, âMelvin Hill was doing the spotting.â

After returning to Danang, the team continued to train and prepare for the jump. Andre Smith, who had recovered from his jump injuries, approached Wesley and asked him if he could be in

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charge of this HALO mission. Wesley said no. A VR was flown from an OV-10 and Wesley took photographs of the intended drop zone. A few days later, intelligence reports indicated that there were thousands of North Vietnamese in the target area. SOG, not wanting to take another chance in that area, cancelled the mission.

CCN had its fill of HALO operations. Others in SOG, however, wanted to make their mark. The next jump came when intelligence sources identified a suspected North Vietnamese headquarters and prison camp near the communist-held Cambodian town of Kratie. Colonel Roger Pezzelle, who had taken over in July as the Op 35 commander, wanted to launch a reconnaissance mission but was hampered by a shortage of suitable long-range helicopters and political restrictions against American troops entering Cambodia. To circumvent these restrictions, a HALO jump was proposed using one Vietnamese and three Montagnards. Plans called for the team to land in a small clearing north of the target, then infiltrate south.

After midnight on 9 October 1971, the four indigenous commandos boarded a C-130E. As during the previous HALO jumps, the crew mimicked the flight path and schedule of a routine supply shuttle to Thailand. With Pezzelle aboard as an observer, the team jumped from 10,000 feet.

Maintaining a tight assembly, the parachutists steered towards their drop zone. Seconds before landing, however, a man entered the edge of the clearing. Startled by the nocturnal encounter, he began to shout as the jumpers touched ground. Enemy soldiers in the nearby bush were alerted and immediately began to converge on the site. Worse, as the team darted into the bush, one of the Montagnards ran headlong into a pointed branch and poked out an eye. Though separated into three groups and on the run for a day, all four commandos were successfully extracted shortly after dusk.

Not to be outdone, SOG's Command and Control Central (CCC) in Kontum was preparing a HALO insertion of its own. Far more ambitious than any of the previous missions, CCC planned a jump of ten men, five Americans and five Vietnamese. Forming the core was RT WASHINGTON, a mixed Montagnard team re-formed after being annihilated in December 1970. From RT WASHINGTON came One-Zero, Staff Sergeant Robert McNier, and One-One, Howard Sugar, plus three Sedang Montagnards, one Bnar and one Jarai. Joining them were three more Americans from CCC recon company: Richard Gross, Charles Behler, and Mark Gentry.

Taken to Long Thanh for two weeks of training, the augmented team began parachuting from helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. Two dozen practice jumps later, they were able to exit a C-130E at 25,000 feet with 110 pounds of equipment and land within 50 meters of each other.

With the team mission-ready by early October, CCC had to generate a target. Given the hazards CCN had encountered jumping into jungle canopy, Kontum dictated that its dropzone would be flat and open. Looking at the map for enemy-infested areas that fit that description, planners decided on the Ia Drang valley. The mission itself, apart from further testing the HALO concept, was a general area reconnaissance.

After two weather aborts, the team boarded a C-130E at Long Thanh during the pre-dawn hours of 11 October 1971. As the aircraft lowered its tailramp at 13,500 feet, the ten men continued to breathe off oxygen consoles until one minute before droptime. At the command from Ben Dennis, they walked to the end of the ramp and stepped into space. Unlike the previous teams, all members wore a Norden Light to aid in midair assembly. But Murphy's Law still intervened: as Mark Gentry left the plane his rucksack ripped loose, causing him to spin away from the rest of the team.

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By the time the ten jumpers touched ground, they were divided into three groups. The largest, consisting of McNier, Behler and three Montagnards, assembled in an open area. Sugar, Gross, and two Montagnards gathered in a second field.

Alone, Gentry managed to land in a tree. His survival radio was pre-programmed to the frequency of radios carried by Behler and Gross, but neither appeared to be working. He had better luck raising an orbiting Covey, but the plane was not carrying a night-vision device and could not identify Gentry's position. Worse, Gentry could hear Vietnamese voices from the jungle around his position. Hiding in the bush until morning, he managed to again contact the Covey.

The Covey finally got a fix on me and told me to move northeast to link up with Behler and McNier, said Gentry. I came across their chutes and gear along the way. Continuing northeast, I arrived at a river and could hear voices. I thought it might be some of the Montagnards from our team, but it turned out to be local communist troops. They saw me and started yelling.

As Gentry took to the jungle, the enemy followed close behind. Heading up a streambed, he threw two mini-grenades, slowing some of them. Seeking refuge off the side of the stream, he traded shots while trying to raise Covey on his radio. When he finally answered, Gentry called for tactical airstrikes, only to be told that the coordinates were too close to Sugar and Gross.

Gentry again took to the bush in an attempt to put space between himself and his teammates. Coming upon an open meadow, he dashed to the sanctuary of a bomb crater and relayed an emergency extraction request. Four enemy soldiers approached but unable to cross the exposed terrain, settled on taking potshots from afar. Gentry fired off the last of his ammunition before being picked up at 1000 hours. The same chopper also retrieved Sugar, Gross, and two Montagnards; the rest of the team was recovered that afternoon.

The CCC operation was thus brought to a close and with it, SOG's flirtation with HALO operations, concluding that as an alternative method of insertion, parachute insertions have created a new threat that enemy (lines of communication) security forces must be prepared to counter. SOG headquarters instead shifted emphasis toward static line jumps from low altitudes. Further airborne insertions all but ceased, however, when SOG was deactivated on 31 March 1972, as part of Washington's plans for disengagement from Indochina. Left with a fraction of the logistical support once available to the Americans, South Vietnam's Liaison Service had little means to carry on the more exotic infiltration techniques developed by its U.S. Special Forces counterparts.

In closing, William "Billy" Waugh put it this way:

We (at SOG) were not the best HALO men assembled, as formation flying was not our specialty. Since it was not, we devised a plan that each man, being separated in the jungle (a given), was a single Recon Man, and should kick ass and take names by blowing Charlie away with TAC AIR (on his own home ground). Recon Company CCN did put HALO into fact, as a silent way to arrive at work.

Attachments

⌘ Standards Weapons & Equipment List

⌘ Credits

STANDARD WEAPONS & EQUIPMENT LIST

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The following is a list of weapons and equipment carried by the HALO jumpers. Jumpers were not limited to only this equipment.

Ã Reserves were the standard T-10's in service at the time. Bunny helmets, and the HALO altimeter and wire reserve mount were used. Timers were KAP-III's.

Ã No special coveralls were used. Uniforms were the standard jungle fatigues and boots, which were spray painted black.

Ã Weapons were the CAR-15/M-203 (carried by Strohlein, Waugh, & Bath), and .22 high standard silenced pistols.

Ã LBE was the STABO harness, pistol belt configuration with four or five canteen pouches for magazines and grenades. SOG knife, rope, first aid and pill kit were also attached.

Ã Rucksacks contained water and LRRP's that had been broken down. (That which one did not want; or wouldn't eat; was taken out.) Also in the rucksack were an M-14, claymore mines, poncho and poncho liner. In one of the pouches was the Penn EE camera, binoculars and a spare battery for the radio.

Ã Miscellaneous items carried included: Pen flares, to include jungle penetrator flares; VS-17 panel cut to a small rectangle just large enough to be seen by a Covey or Helicopter; IR strobes; & metascope.

Ã Individual communication consisted of the URC-10 and URC-68 survival radios. These are line-of-site radios and worked well when communicating with aircraft. Some teams may have carried the PRC-25 radio.

CREDITS

Credit must be given to Kenneth Conboy, the originator of this article.

In early 2000, Jim Bath sent Charles Wesley a copy of Conboy's document. After reading it, Wesley realized that a lot of the history of HALO Operations was missing, including the actions of jumpers during training as well as details of the actual jumps. To Conboy's document, Wesley began adding information he could remember from that period. Then, he requested the jumpers themselves to tell their stories and make corrections to what was already written. It is important that the History of HALO Operations in Vietnam be correct.

All but a few of the HALO jumpers provided stories and information. So, thanks must also be given to the following men:

Billy Waugh - Robert Castillo - Cliff Newman - Jim Bath

Larry Manes - John Trantanella - Melvin Hill - Jesse Campbell

Others that provided information and details were:

Ã The Bright Light teams 10 and 11 (RT HABU), Lemuel McGlothren and Nick Brokhausen.

Ã Les Chapman, the Covey rider that located Madison Strohlein, and inserted the Bright Light team provided information.

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Ã Ben Dennis, one of the static jumpmasters - he was on TDY from the 1st SFG on Okinawa to help train the jumpers at Long Thanh.

Ã Robert Sinton for verifying that our team, Wesley, Chaffe and Reando missed the drop zone and landed in an RFPF ambush on an early morning training jump.

Ã Instructors at Long Thanh at various times:

George Zacker (NCOIC) Larry Manes
Frank Norbury Cliff Newman
Ben Dennis Joe Markham
Harry Denny Melvin Hill
Billy Waugh Tiak Bya Ya
And a few Vietnamese