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THE SECRET WAR AGAINST HANOI by Richard H. Shultz, Jr.

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CROSSING THE FENCE – Page 247

“President Johnson’s bombing halt in North Vietnam also helped the NVA’s security buildup on the trail. It “released large numbers of personnel to expand and secure the lines of communications, bases, and staging areas in Laos.”¹²⁷ For the men of OP 35, this was like rubbing salt into an open wound. It was bad enough that they had to contend with all that the enemy was doing to secure the trail, but did Washington policy makers have to make it easier for Hanoi by halting the bombing? Furthermore, they wondered, how much sense did it make to accept such demands by Hanoi in order to start negotiating a peace arrangement? What were the geostrategic thinkers in Washington doing?

The real impact of North Vietnamese countermeasures can be seen in the decreasing operational effectiveness of recon teams and their increasing losses. The trends were alarming. Larry Trapp, former deputy chief of OP 35, recalled that in 1968 the NVA deployed “a lot of their forces in Laos, looking for recon teams. We had to use all kinds of diversionary actions, but still the time on the ground [for a recon team] was changing and becoming briefer. Also, we found that they would try to locate a team and surround it and hold it. . . . They knew that we would come after them. Then they’d move their anti-aircraft guns around it. It was a major effort.”¹²⁸

Out at FOB 4, Lieutenant Colonel Lauren Overby was having a tough time in 1968. While his teams were identifying enemy targets and calling in air strikes, the enemy was all too frequently attacking recon teams as soon as they were inserted. Overby noted that it “became almost impossible to keep a team on the ground for any length of time. They may have had more success in Cambodia [Daniel Boone]. I’m not aware of that. . . . My area of operations was becoming increasingly difficult. My launch space was about six miles from the border. They probably had somebody watching my launch.”¹²⁹

For the teams carrying out Prairie Fire operations, 1968 was a bad year in terms of casualties. The numbers were on the rise. In Laos, 18 were killed, 101 wounded, and 18 missing. Because of SOF’s involvement in Tet, in-country losses added another

21 killed, 78 wounded, and 6 missing. OP 35 teams carrying out Daniel Boone operations in Cambodia and South Vietnam were not hit as hard. Still, 17 SOG men died, 56 were wounded, and 3 were missing. What makes these casualty figures so arresting is the fact that in 1968, OP 35's command-and-control detachments were composed of approximately 100 U.S. officers and 600 enlisted men.¹³⁰

Things did not get any better in Laos in 1969. However, OP 35 did not back down: the number of Prairie Fire operations across the fence rose by 40 percent. A total of "452 missions were executed, of which 404 were recon team size and 48 were exploitation force missions. On average, Prairie Fire was executing 38 operations a month."¹³¹ The brass wanted more, and SOG delivered.

The records for Prairie Fire in 1969 stated that "in all statistical categories. . . . operational results rose over those for 1968. Significantly, enemy KIA more than doubled over the previous year and enemy weapons captured nearly tripled. Some of the more successful operations were roadblock/interdiction missions in the tri-border area." The recon teams were also uncovering important enemy refinements of the trail in Laos. For example, they found a fuel pipeline. Not only did the NVA have truck-repair parks along the trail, they were in effect opening up gas stations. What next? wondered the men of SOG. They soon found out that the NVA was wiring the trail with a multichannel communications system.¹³²

Recon teams were providing MACV with "a major portion of the hard intelligence on VC/NVA use of Laos as an infiltration and staging area." In particular, they were able to provide valuable evidence of the enemy's expansion of the tri-border area as a "prime infiltration route for the movement of troops and equipment into the Republic of Vietnam." In certain parts of the Prairie Fire region, recon teams "provided the only hard intelligence concerning [the enemy's] logistic build-up."¹³³

This was the good news. Unfortunately, there was also plenty of bad news for those recon teams operating in Laos in 1969. They still were under many of the restrictions imposed by Ambassador Sullivan. While there had been some relief, the teams were still constrained in terms of how deeply they could penetrate, but the enemy operated under no such restriction. In 1969, the NVA refined its countermeasures, including an "increased ability to react swiftly to [SOG] heli-borne operations." This "posed a significant threat to cross-border operations," according to MACVSOG'S end-of-year report for 1969.¹³⁴ Prairie Fire teams "continued to encounter strong enemy resistance." There seemed to be more and more NVA assigned to trail security. Finally, the report noted, enemy activities to secure the trail were aided by "the bombing halt in North Vietnam." It "enabled the enemy to increase his infiltration . . . and up-grade the posture of his security forces." This included adding more "AAA [anti-aircraft artillery] positions through the Prairie Fire Area of Operations," since they were no longer needed up North.¹³⁵

This was the situation that Colonel Jack "the Iceman" Isler inherited when he became chief of OP 35 in 1969. It was his first tour in Vietnam. Isler had transferred into Special Forces from the infantry in the early 1960s and had been Colonel Steve Cavanaugh's deputy when Cavanaugh commanded the 10th Special Forces Group in Europe. When Cavanaugh became chief of SOG in September 1968, he asked Isler "to come work with me."¹³⁶ Once on the job, Isler quickly became "aware that there was a hell of a lot of restrictions . . . we couldn't do what we really should be doing It was never really explained to me what the reason was for why we can't go beyond certain limits in Laos."¹³⁷ He was to learn that the restrictions were the legacy of the recently departed U.S. ambassador to Laos, Bill Sullivan.

Isler's teams were having a rough go of it. Their time on the ground during an operation "was shrinking It was tougher all the time." The NVA was making it "much more difficult to get a team in and to stay on the ground for any time at all. Some of them did get to stay but it was touch and go. They always seemed to be right on top of us a great deal of the time."¹³⁸ When Bull Simons began operating against the trail, he planned for recon teams to stay in Laos for five or six days. By 1969, however, Isler's teams were staying "no more than two days. Many times it was six hours. Put a team in and go right back in and get it out. There were so many NVN security forces out there, our teams would just run into them."¹³⁹ The bombing halts did not help matters: "Every time we had bombing halts . . . they just built up that much more. That hurt us."¹⁴⁰

As the effectiveness of NVA countermeasures continued to rise, so did its capacity to inflict casualties on Prairie Fire recon teams. During 1969, "U.S. casualty figures were 50% per mission as compared to 44% in 1968 and 39% in 1967."¹⁴¹ On every other recon operation in Laos, one U.S. team member was killed, wounded, or missing. For the 452 missions executed, U.S. casualties included 19 killed, 199 wounded, and 9 missing. Prairie Fire operations were the responsibility of CCN in Da Nang and CCC in Kontum. These two detachments had a combined U.S. strength of 72 officers and 409 enlisted personnel in 1969.¹⁴² If one considers the fact that the U.S. members of a recon team were largely NCOs, the casualty figures are stunning. It was a large number of Purple Hearts for such a small military unit.

Things were easier for SOG teams in Cambodia, now code-named Salem House, where the NVA presence was not as great. During 1969, "the per mission casualty rate for U.S. personnel was 13%," significantly below the 50 percent experienced on Prairie Fire operations in Laos.¹⁴³ However, because of the restraints placed on Salem House, recon operations did not accomplish all that they could.

During 1969, 454 recon missions were carried out in Cambodia. Their purpose was exclusively intelligence collection. The State Department would allow nothing more. MACV requested "the use of tactical aircraft in Cambodia, along with exploitation forces" to hit targets "detected by Salem House reconnaissance teams." To MACV, it only made military sense, because "the increased use of Cambodia posed a continuing

offensive threat to allied forces and installations in RVN. This threat is particularly evident in the tri-border area. . . . The recent introduction of enemy armor capabilities in this area serves to emphasize the importance of Cambodia to the enemy as safe haven." MACV wanted to attack the NVA in Cambodia and compel it "to increase the forces committed to a defensive role and decrease his offensive capability to infiltrate RVN."¹⁴⁴ It seemed like a reasonable request.

State did not see it that way. It was still trying "to resume diplomatic relations . . . with Sihanouk" and argued that the MACV proposal would muddy those efforts. "A decision to expand combat operations into Cambodia . . . by committing U.S.-led troops to this initiative" was, Foggy Bottom asserted, not "wise at present." As a result, State refused to concur with the MACV request, and the secretary of defense decided that "the proposal should not be pursued."¹⁴⁵

There was at least one exception to this restriction, and it cost SOG dearly. One of its most skillful and highly decorated recon men—Sergeant First Class Jerry Shriver—was lost. Shriver's daring exploits, which made him a legend within the Special Forces community, had led Radio Hanoi to refer to him as a "mad dog." By 1969 Shriver was into his third year operating against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. On April 24 he was part of a hatchet force company that deployed to Cambodia in a daring raid against COSVN's secret headquarters.

It was a disastrous mission that began with a massive B-52 assault. It hardly made a dent in the enemy forces waiting for what amounted to a reinforced platoon of the hatchet force company. There were not enough helicopters to lift in the entire force, and once under way, one of the helicopters had to turn back because of a mechanical failure. No sooner were the SOG raiders on the ground when they were pinned down by enemy fire. Under these harrowing circumstances, Mad Dog Shriver again distinguished himself in battle when he led an assault into the teeth of the NVA forces to free his trapped comrades.

It is unclear what happened to Jerry Shriver. Some on the raid believe he was killed in the melee. Others assert Shriver was captured and taken to Hanoi. A massive air strike was needed to extract the badly mauled SOG force.¹⁴⁶

As 1969 came to an end, it was apparent that the United States' days in Vietnam were numbered. Massive troop withdrawals were on the horizon as Washington adopted a policy of Vietnamization. However, war on the trail continued and SOG remained fully engaged with the NVA.

SOG Fights On as the U.S. Phases Out of the War: 1970—1972

Early in 1969, President Richard Nixon remarked to his senior staff, "I'm going to

stop the war. Fast."¹⁴⁷ That was not all. He intended the United States' exit from Vietnam to be honorable and to have no hint of defeat or sellout. Nixon thought he could convince Hanoi to accept his plan for ending hostilities. After all, it was now dealing with someone who was not averse to employing maximum military power. The days of limited and graduated force were over. Nixon would deliver his own hammer blows to Hanoi if it did not play ball with him.

To this end, Nixon sent a message to North Vietnam declaring his sincere desire for peace and suggesting as a first step the mutual withdrawal of all U.S. and NVA troops from South Vietnam. To make the point that there were dire consequences for not complying, he initiated an intensive secret bombing of NVA sanctuaries in Cambodia. Hanoi had better accept Nixon's terms for ending the war or there would be hell to pay. To keep things quiet at home, the administration proclaimed a "comprehensive peace plan" to make clear to the American people its goal of ending American involvement in the war. As a sweetener, Nixon announced the withdrawal of 25,000 U.S. troops from Vietnam.

Hanoi was not impressed with these proposals. Having stood up to 500,000 troops and powerful weaponry that inflicted extensive casualties and hardships, Hanoi found Nixon's bluster and the sideshow in Cambodia hardly convincing. North Vietnam's delegation to the Paris peace talks rejected the president's gambit as a "farce." To put a fine point on their truculence, the head of the delegation stated that they were prepared to sit in Paris "until the chairs rot" before they would accept such terms.¹⁴⁸ Nixon was furious over what he called Hanoi's "cold rebuff."¹⁴⁹ He ordered national security adviser Henry Kissinger to convene a special study group and devise a massive bombing campaign against the North's major cities and a blockade of all major ports. Nixon wanted to hit North Vietnam with "savage, punishing blows."¹⁵⁰ If it did not want to play ball, he was ready to take the gloves off.

Kissinger's special studies group focused on the impact a "savage" bombing campaign might have on Hanoi's will. Their conclusion was not what Nixon wanted to hear. A massive bombing campaign and blockade would not force Hanoi to accept Nixon's terms. The North Vietnamese leadership had been at war too long to fold under the pressure of another bombing campaign. They were intransigent. Furthermore, bombing was not likely to significantly undermine Hanoi's military capacity to continue fighting in South Vietnam. The first year of his presidency was coming to a close, and Nixon was far from being able "to stop that war. Fast."

At this point, Nixon and Kissinger turned to "Vietnamization" as the way out. The United States would resuscitate and modernize the ARVN so that it could take over the ground war. This was not a new idea. The French had tried it in the 1950s. They called it *jaunisse-ment*, or yellowing. It did not work. When the United States took over the war in 1965, it was with the intention of giving the ARVN breathing space to develop into a force that could do its own fighting. But little progress had been made between 1965 and 1968.

Why did the administration think it could work now? Because Sir Robert Thompson, the British counterinsurgency expert, told them the situation was ripe for Vietnamization. A recognized expert in defeating guerrillas, Thompson had played an instrumental role in the defeat of insurgents in Malaysia in the late 1950s. The Kennedy administration requested that he head the British mission to South Vietnam in 1961. Thompson stayed until 1965, but his ideas about “winning the hearts and minds” of the population through pacification got nowhere. When Johnson decided to take over the war from the South Vietnamese, Thompson cautioned against relying on American military power as the answer.

In October 1968, Thompson informed Nixon that South Vietnam “was growing stronger and that if the United States continued to furnish large-scale military and economic assistance it might be strong enough within two years to resist a communist takeover without external help.”¹⁵¹ Nixon eagerly embraced Thompson’s evaluation. The proponents of Vietnamization argued that there was a window of opportunity, because Hanoi and the Viet Cong were hurting from the losses suffered during the Tet offensive. With the enemy reverting to a defensive strategy and limiting its military activity, Vietnamization’s time had come.

Transforming the ARVN in two years into a modern and professional army that could stand up to the NVA was, by any stretch of the imagination, a daunting task. The United States would provide huge quantities of the newest weaponry to arm a million-man force.¹⁵² The cost of such an undertaking was not an issue. It was a drop in the bucket. The bill for U.S. involvement in Vietnam, going back to the Truman administration, was more than \$150 billion. In the countryside, the policy of Vietnamization sought to accelerate pacification in order to extend government control, enhance village security through the training of local militia, and improve living conditions. American combat troops would keep NVA and Viet Cong forces inside South Vietnam at bay. Finally, there were the enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos. Here is where MACVSOG came into the picture.

Vietnamization was a pipe dream, given the timetable. Two years was not enough even under ideal conditions. The flaws in the strategy quickly became apparent, given Nixon’s decision to withdraw 150,000 troops during 1970. MACV warned that this could seriously undermine Vietnamization, because it would limit the United States’ capacity to keep the NVA and Viet Cong off balance. It did just that. By the end of 1970, the capacity of American forces to conduct offensive operations had been severely downgraded. Soon, MACV would move to a strategy of defending enclaves near major bases and cities. This amounted to relying on the ARVN to hold the countryside.

Nixon’s decision to accelerate troop withdrawals in 1970 had no effect on OP 35’s operational tempo. Prairie Fire recon teams kept up the fight against the NVA on the trail in Laos. They executed 441 missions, 95 percent of which were reconnaissance ones. The use of exploitation forces was becoming highly problematic because of the

difficulty of getting larger formations in and out of Laos under fire. While U.S. conventional forces were cutting back on operations and leaving Vietnam, for Prairie Fire teams the war was hardly winding down.

Colonel Dan Schungel took over OP 35 in February 1970. He was an old Special Forces hand who served his first tour in Vietnam as the deputy chief of the Fifth Special Forces Group. In that capacity, he had helped run the Civilian Irregular Defense Group program. His next assignment was back at Fort Bragg as the commanding officer of the Seventh Special Forces Group, a position he held until early 1970.

Although Schungel's teams executed 441 operations against the trail, fewer and fewer of those fit his description of an effective reconnaissance team operation. "A recon team, would be totally successful," he asserted, "if it would be able to operate the entire duration of a mission without making direct contact with the enemy. Now, visual contact is good. If you can make visual contact with an enemy formation without making physical contact, call in an air strike on it, injure the enemy formation or perhaps utterly destroy it—that is a real bonus for a recon team." In 1970, not many of Schungel's recon teams were making just visual contact. Rather, the NVA was making direct contact with them. The chief of OP 35 remembers that "more and more our helicopters either met [a waiting enemy] or the recon team that had just been discharged was soon engaged by enemy security forces . . . Too often, the recon teams got engaged in heavy combat and had to have a lot of support just to get this small element out of there. This was costly."¹⁵³

It was readily apparent to Schungel that the enemy countermeasures had become quite effective. For example, by 1970, the North Vietnamese had established a "sophisticated communications system, [which] allowed the enemy to monitor the insertion of teams, direct trackers into the area, and thereby directly influence the short stay-time experienced, particularly in the northern Prairie Fire area of operation." To further enhance this effort, NVA "mobile tracker teams were strategically placed along all significant high point observation sites" along the trail in Laos.¹⁵⁴

In 1970, Pete Hayes was back in SOG for his second tour, this time as CCN commander. His recon teams saw their missions compromised at an increasing and alarming rate, often as soon as they hit the ground in Laos. On one occasion, Hayes recalls, the waiting NVA actually "called the team by name and they named an individual [team member] by name." In another instance, a team "got shot up and they said that the people who came out shooting at them—it was in real rainy weather—came out in dry uniforms. So, they had been there set up and waiting under cover."¹⁵⁵ These kinds of harrowing stories were told more and more frequently by those running recon missions in 1970.

In light of these developments, it is surprising that Prairie Fire teams suffered fewer casualties in 1970 than they had in 1969. Schungel's teams had 12 Americans killed, 98 wounded, and 4 missing. The year before, one U.S. team member was killed,

wounded or missing for every other recon operation in Laos. In 1970, this dropped to one casualty in every fourth operation.

If Prairie Fire teams were being found by the enemy at a rate at least equal to that of 1969, how could casualties be falling in 1970? What accounts for this seeming contradiction was OP 35's ability to extract teams safely, even as enemy forces were closing in. Schungel observed that teams "engaged in heavy combat" received "a lot of support" to get them "out." SOG could call in awesome air support to rescue a team in trouble. Schungel notes: "Many of the [RTs] had to be extracted under fire. That was when it got costly because the helicopters used to extract them and those used to support the extraction had to hover and were extremely tempting and vulnerable targets. We did lose some helicopters. We lost people who were killed and wounded in these hot extractions."¹⁵⁶

To protect rescue helicopters, SOG had access to impressive tactical air support that often cut down enemy forces closing in on a recon team. Pete Hayes, the CCN commander in 1970, always got what he needed for a rescue attempt: "I got all the TAC air [tactical air command] I needed and my FAC [forward air controller] coverage was superb and helicopter gunship support was really good."¹⁵⁷ When the going got especially tough, he could even use "CS/CN gas [tear gas] within the Prairie Fire Area of Operations," but only "on a case by case basis . . . to assist in the extraction of a team."¹⁵⁸

One former recon-team leader, with three tours in SOG, summed up Prairie Fire operations in 1970 as "close-quarters, all-out gunfights against masses of NVA."¹⁵⁹ Even so, SOG was still making an important contribution. Prairie Fire recon teams "contributed a major portion of the hard intelligence on VC/NVA use of Laos as an infiltration/staging area."¹⁶⁰ Such intelligence became increasingly valuable, given Nixon's decision to withdraw 150,000 combat troops during 1970. With fewer forces at hand, warning of impending enemy strikes became increasingly crucial. SOG recon teams also tied up considerable NVA troops in Laos on trail security duty.

While Prairie Fire teams were still holding their own against the NVA in 1970, disturbing developments took place that were a harbinger of bad things to come. Recon teams and exploitation units engaged in fifty operations inside the borders of South Vietnam.¹⁶¹ This was ominous, for it signaled that the enemy was closing in as U.S. combat forces withdrew from the war.

In Cambodia, Salem House operations experienced dramatic changes in 1970. During the first four months of the year, the enemy continued to use Cambodia as a sanctuary for strikes into South Vietnam. Recon teams verified many enemy locations, infiltration routes, and logistical complexes. They painted a detailed picture of what the NVA was up to.

Nixon had been "secretly" bombing Cambodia since early 1969 to keep the enemy off-balance while he withdrew U.S. troops. The bombing did not achieve the intended effect. Rather, it contributed to unrest inside Cambodia, and on March 18, 1970, Prince Sihanouk was deposed by General Lon Nol. Nixon now decided to do something about the sanctuaries. A combined U.S.-ARVN force would cross the border and destroy them. Code named Operation Binh Tay, the incursion had mixed results, although it likely bought some time for Vietnamization. Hanoi's sanctuaries were rendered unusable, at least temporarily.

The Cambodian incursion also had some unintended consequences. First it saddled the Nixon administration with another fragile client government in Southeast Asia. The Lon Nol government, which engineered a coup in January 1970 to oust Sihanouk, had little legitimacy in Cambodia and was no match for the Khmer Rouge. The United States kept it afloat, but once Washington withdrew, its days were numbered. In 1975, the government of Lon Nol collapsed and he fled to Hawaii.

Second, at home the Cambodian operation caused a huge domestic political reaction. The Nixon administration did not expect it. Students across the country demonstrated against this escalation of the war. On May 1, 1970, students of Kent State in Ohio marched against the war and some rioted. The situation escalated and resulted in the Ohio National Guard killing four students. This incident triggered further demonstrations and a massive march in Washington. As a result of these developments, on June 30, ground operations in Cambodia were terminated and all U.S. personnel were ordered out. As for MACVSOG, it "was no longer authorized to employ U.S.-led teams in Cambodia." Only "all-indigenous teams were authorized" to cross the fence.¹⁶² During 1970, Salem House teams executed 577 operations in Cambodia, all but 19 of which were recon missions. The overwhelming majority of these were conducted by all-indigenous units. TAC air could be used after May to hit targets located by these teams.

Because of Nixon's cross-border incursion, the "overall results of [Salem House] operations in 1970 reveal a marked increase in both the number of operations conducted and in team stay-time over similar statistics in 1969." It was a good year. Operation Binh Tay was "successful in causing severe dislocations of enemy troop concentrations and logistic operations. Enemy border base areas were, for the most part, rendered useless and were not reoccupied until late 1970." The NVA and VC were not gone, but had simply "relocated deeper" inside Cambodia. In December, they began "reestablishing border sanctuaries."¹⁶³ As a result, 1971 would not be such a fruitful year for Salem House operations inside Cambodia. Still, it was easier than "crossing the fence" into Laos.

Op 35's final fifteen months were marked by spiraling danger for recon teams. While Nixon's accelerated timetable of troop withdrawals reduced available combat forces to 75,000 by the end of 1971, SOG teams were largely unaffected by the draw-down. They remained at almost the same force strength and fought at roughly the

same pace as the previous two years. While ever-improving NVA countermeasures had yet to make Lao impenetrable, nevertheless it was very tough to keep a recon team on the ground for any length of time. The last chief of MACVSOG, Colonel Skip Sadler, explained that by the end of 1970, "only 40% of SOG teams remained in Laos for over twenty-four hours, so strong had the NVA become. . . . They were in position, they know you're coming, and that's a recipe for deadly results."¹⁶⁴ "

Col. Jerry Ransom had a lot to do with the organizational establishment of OLAA. The USAF did not get a vote in this reversal of Vietnamization plans as our unit was formed by dictates from the JCS and likely higher. SOG did not report to MACV, but instead directly to the JCS. I am not certain that Col. Ransom selected Lt. Col. Jim Wold for Commander, but I believe he did. For sure, he met with Jim Wold and Major Dean DeTar beginning on 10Nov69 to work out operational details that involved many rapid decisions as we began combat operations on 12Nov69. I was told that Col. Wold demanded that we continue to have nearly all single seat A-1H/J models as an operational requirement. I am also aware that Col. Ransom was extremely supportive of OLAA from the beginning of the unit until he DEROSSED. He and Col. George Morris got it about the need for as much Spad support as possible for SOG teams in the AO as their losses in 1968/69 were horrific. There is plenty of documentation to be able to say that 1970 was a relatively good year for SOG teams due in large part to the then and now still unknown OLAA Skyraider support of MACVSOG operations.

<https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Visit/Museum-Exhibits/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/197581/lt-col-jerald-ransom-first-100-north-vietnam-a-1-missions/>

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