

More Dirty Work

By Stuart H. Loory

COLUMBUS, Ohio—The revelation in recent days of clandestine cross-border operations by American ground troops in Cambodia, Laos and North Vietnam during the war reminds me once again that, somewhere in the United States, at least one Vietnam veteran has some important stories to tell.

I do not know his name. I have heard from him only once. He wrote to me from the San Diego area on Feb. 2, 1971 in response to an article I had written for The Los Angeles Times. My article detailed the planning and execution of the November 1970 raid on North Vietnam's Sontay Prison, the famous abortive attempt to rescue American P.O.W.'s from a site just a few miles from Hanoi.

The article exposed the bungled intelligence procedures used which meant that mission planners had no good information on whether Americans were actually kept at Sontay, whether, indeed, it was even a prison.

My anonymous correspondent expressed incredulity and he offered enough detail in his letter to make himself credible. His detail exposed the fact that for years the United States had actually been carrying the war in South Vietnam, with ground troops as well as bombers, right into the North Vietnamese heartland.

He spoke of an organization called "SOG," which, at the time, was unfamiliar to me. In recent weeks, SOG (Studies and Observation Group) has been revealed by articles in this newspaper and The New Republic as the military's own dirty tricks department.

"SOG can put a recon team into any place in North Vietnam, utilizing Vietnamese who were born and raised in the specific area," my correspondent said. "I know this is true because I

spent 23 months as head adviser to the waterborne element of SOG and helped plan and execute many such missions.

"It was not unusual on many missions of this unit to have a man killed or wounded in the same hamlet in which he had been born. . . ."

The letter writer then continued with some specifics about how SOG men, who had been commanded for a time by the same Col. Arthur D. "Bull" Simons who led the attackers into Sontay, could have parachuted into the Sontay region, checked out the camp and radioed a one-word yes or no answer to the question of whether Americans were there. He told of special radios the unit used. He said the men were trained in HALO (high altitude, low opening) parachute jump techniques.

And then, on page three of his letter, he penned the sentence that has haunted me for the two and one-half years since I first read it. It was added parenthetically:

"SOG is not beyond sending in an armed chopper in a case like this and executing the scout/recon team by gunning them down on the LZ." LZ is military shorthand for landing zone.

If I read that sentence correctly, I was being told that once the American military had employed Vietnamese to do a difficult piece of dirty work, the commandos were rewarded with execution rather than rescue out of the feeling that dead men cannot, like recovered heroes, live to talk of their exploits and compromise future missions.

In other words, SOG disposed of its own Vietnamese like so many pieces of Kleenex. Even against the background of all the documented cruelty in the Vietnam war—the free-fire zones, the carpet bombing, the use of white phosphorus and other antipersonnel weapons, the tiger cages, the torture, the defoliation—the thought

that Americans were cynically executing their allies beggared the imagination.

The thought bespeaks an inhumanity that shames our country more than any Watergate, "plumbers" group or enemies list can.

My instincts have told me the contents of the letter are true. However, despite repeated efforts, I was never able to doublecheck and confirm the veracity. Because of the letter's implications, I have refrained from publishing the information. Now that other activities of SOG have been exposed, I am more convinced than ever of the letter's truth and importance.

My correspondent took me for a better reporter than I actually was. He concluded his letter this way:

"I could relate page after page of data on SOG but I feel you've probably heard much of it or similar stories. . . . So take it from an old scout-swimmer and SOG alumni, Mr. Loory; somebody ain't telling it like it is."

Old scout-swimmer and SOG alumni, wherever you are, if you should happen to read this, your page after page of data would be a welcome contribution to history. Come forward, please, as so many others have recently and help the American people find the way.

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