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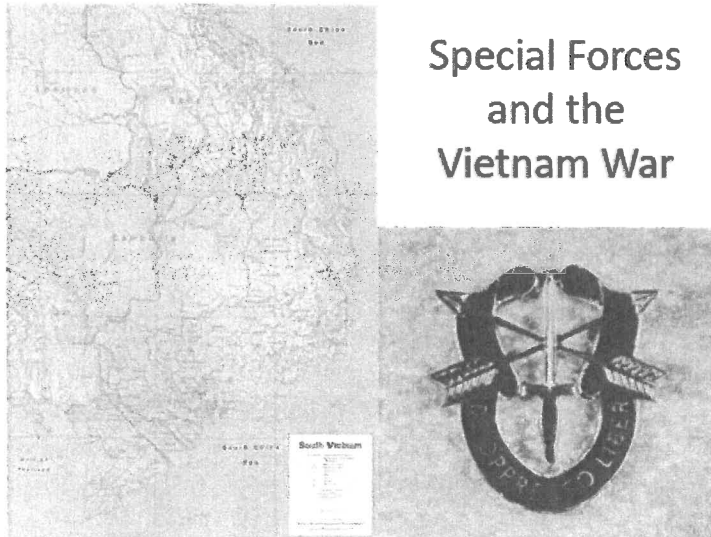
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## History – U.S. Army Special Forces in Vietnam (1957-1972)

🕒 March 9, 2021   👤 SOF News   📁 History   💬 0



### Special Forces and the Vietnam War

By Francis A. Abram.

Nam Dong, Lang Vei, Dak To, A Shau, Plei Mei – these were just some of the place's SF troops fought and died during their 15-year stay in South Vietnam. It was a stay that began in June 1957, when the original 16 members of the 14th SF Operational Detachment deployed to Vietnam to train a cadre of indigenous Vietnamese SF teams. The first and last American Soldiers to die in Vietnam due to enemy action were members of the 1st SF Group. On Oct. 21, 1957,

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### ARCHIVES

Captain Harry G. Cramer Jr. was killed, and on Oct. 12, 1972, Sgt. Fred C. Mick was killed.

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Throughout the latter years of the 1950s and early 1960s, the number of Special Forces advisers in Vietnam steadily increased. Their responsibility was to train South Vietnamese soldiers in the art of counterinsurgency and to mold various native tribes into a credible anti-communist threat. Initially, elements from the different SF groups were involved in advising the South Vietnamese. In September 1964, the 5th SF Group was formed exclusively to conduct operations in Vietnam. The 5th Group set up its provisional headquarters in Nha Trang. Nearly six months later, in February, Nha Trang became the 5th's permanent headquarters. From that point on, all SF Soldiers in Vietnam were assigned to the 5th until 1971, when the group returned to Fort Bragg.

By the time the 5th left Southeast Asia, SF soldiers had earned 17 Medals of Honor, one Distinguished Service Medal, 90 Distinguished Service Crosses, 814 Silver Star Medals, 13,234 Bronze Star Medals, 235 Legions of Merit, 46 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 232 Soldier's Medals, 4,891 Air Medals, 6,908 Army Commendation Medals and 2,658 Purple Hearts. It was a brilliant record, built on blood and sacrifice.

Not to be overlooked, other SF training teams were operating in the 1960s in Bolivia, Venezuela, Guatemala, Colombia and the Dominican Republic. Counterinsurgency forces of the 8th SF Group conducted clandestine operations against guerrilla forces, carrying out some 450 missions between 1965 and 1968. In 1968, SF-trained Bolivian rangers were involved in tracking down and capturing the notorious revolutionary, Che Guevara, in the wilds of south-central Bolivia.

Southeast Asia, however, was the SF's primary focus. Through their unstinting labors, SF troops eventually established 254 outposts throughout Vietnam, many of them defended by a single A-team and hundreds of friendly natives. But fighting in remote areas of Vietnam – publicity to the contrary – wasn't the only mission of SF. It was also responsible for training thousands of Vietnam's ethnic tribesmen in the techniques of guerrilla warfare. SF took the Montagnards, the Nungs, the Cao Dei and others and molded them into the 60,000-strong Civilian Irregular Defense Group, or CIDG. CIDG troops became the SF's most valuable ally in battles fought in faraway corners of Vietnam, out of reach of conventional back-up forces.

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Other missions included civic-action projects, in which SF troops built schools, hospitals and government buildings, provided medical care to civilians and dredged canals. This was the other side of the SF mission, the part of the war designed to win the hearts and minds of the people.

SF personnel were instrumental in the covert war against North Vietnam. The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam – Studies and Observation Group, or MACV-SOG, conducted cross-border operations into Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam to disrupt the enemy's use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. SF-led teams ran in-country long-range reconnaissance patrols under the Delta, Sigma and Omega projects.

In one of the most daring missions of the war, Special Forces Soldiers (many from the 6th and 7th Groups) under Colonel "Bull" Simons launched a raid to rescue 70 American prisoners of war from the Son Tay Prison outside Hanoi. Staged out of Thailand, the assault was successful, but unbeknownst to the U.S., the prisoners had been relocated due to the flooding of a nearby river. The valiant attempt, known as Operation Ivory Coast, raised the morale of the POWs and forced the North Vietnamese into improving the treatment of the captives.

On March 5, 1971, the 5th Group returned to Fort Bragg, although some SF teams remained in Thailand, from where they launched secret missions into Vietnam. But by the end of 1972, the SF role in Vietnam had diminished.

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**Image:** Map, CIA, 1972.

◀ SPECIAL FORCES VIETNAM

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