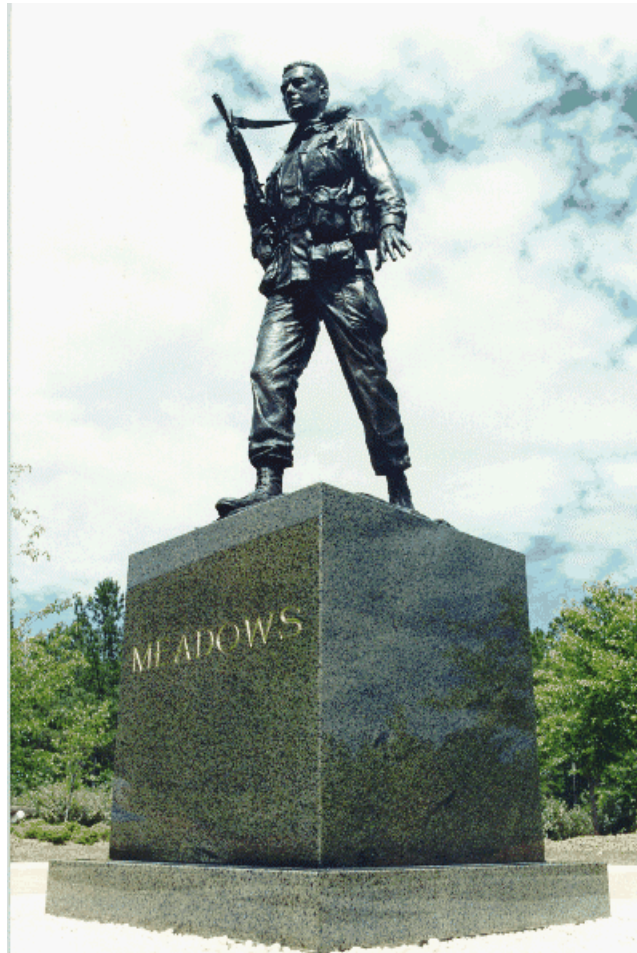


Richard J. Meadows  
Major, US Army (Retired)  
“Quiet Professional”



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1931 - 1995

*“Repeatedly answering our country’s call and taking on the most dangerous and sensitive missions, few have been as willing to put themselves in harms way for their fellow country men.”*

*The White House, Washington, DC*

*July 26, 1995*

## **Dick Meadows: A Quiet Professional**

*By Captain Jay Ashburner*

On July 29, 1995, the special operations community lost a true legend with the passing of retired Major Richard J. “Dick” Meadows. His extraordinary exploits spanned more than three decades and included the most widely known and defining missions in the history of U.S. Special Operations. Dick Meadows exemplified devotion to duty, serving as a noncommissioned officer, as a commissioned officer, and after his retirement, as a civilian special consultant (read operator) to U.S. Army Special Forces and the joint SOF community.

Meadows was born June 16, 1931, in rural Virginia and enlisted in the Army in August 1947, at the age of 16. His first service was with the 456<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division.

In early 1951 Meadows volunteered for assignment to the 674<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion, 187<sup>th</sup> Regimental Combat Team, Korea. There he served with distinction and became the youngest Maser Sergeant in the war, at age 20. After serving in Korea, Meadows volunteered for Special Forces, and in March 1953 he was assigned to the 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group. For the next 24 years, Meadows served in the SOF community, with assignments to both Ranger and Special Forces units.

In 1960, Meadows was selected to participate in an exchange program between the 7<sup>th</sup> Special Forces and British 22<sup>nd</sup> Special Air Service Regiment, or

SAS. He was the first NCO to be selected for the program, and his performance with SAS was distinguished by several milestones: he completed the SAS selection course; he was the first of two foreign soldiers to be awarded SAS wings, and he served for 12 months as a troop commander, a position normally held by a British Captain. While serving with the SAS, Meadows was selected to participate in a real-world mission in Oman against terrorists and gun smugglers.

Meadows' first experience in the Southeast Asian Theater came with an assignment to Operation White Star in Laos. White Star was a foreign internal defense mission, conducted to advise, assist, equip, and train Laotian government forces in counterinsurgency operations against North Vietnamese backed Pathet Lao forces. The intent of White Star was to secure the sovereignty of Laos and provide a buffer between friendly Thailand and communist North Vietnam. Meadows not only assisted in establishing and organizing Royal Lao Army regular forces but also participated in an unconventional warfare mission with tribal guerrilla fighters. It was while he was in Laos that Meadows met Lieutenant Colonel Arthur D. "Bull" Simons and worked with him on a program to organize and arm the Kha tribal groups.

After returning from Laos, Meadows spent the next three years in Panama, where he helped establish the 8<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group in the Canal Zone. There he was a standout in Operation Black Palm, a training exercise using U.S. Special Forces and members of the Panamanian Defense Forces to test the existing security of the Panama Canal. During one 48-hour period in the operation, Meadows and his team, playing the part of soldiers captured by the PDF, escaped from jail and without being detected, planted simulated demolition charges on one of the Canal's most heavily guarded locks.

In 1965, Meadows volunteered for a second tour in Southeast Asia. This tour took him to Vietnam and to one of the most secretive and elite units of the war, the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, or MACVSOG. Operational detachments of this unit conducted what were arguably the most dangerous missions of Vietnam War. SOG personnel operated beyond the constraints of territorial borders, performing a myriad of the covert mission throughout Southeast Asia. They specialized in intelligence gathering and direct action in the heart of areas either controlled or dominated by the enemy. Once again, Meadows excelled.

During one of Meadows' first cross-border reconnaissance missions into Laos, his team captured a battery of Russian made 75mm howitzers, still packed in Cosmoline, being shipped south from North Vietnam. As proof to their find, Meadows' team returned from the mission with the Russian made fire control equipment. This was the first concrete evidence to support President Lyndon Johnson's claim that the Vietnam conflict was more than an internal revolutionary war. This proof of external sponsorship was of such importance that General William C. Westmoreland, the senior U.S. commander in Vietnam, personally debriefed Meadows and his team.

Meadows completed more than two-dozen missions into North Vietnam and Laos. Westmoreland recommended him for a battlefield commission, the first of

the Vietnam War and the one of only two that Westmoreland would make during his four years as commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam.

Upon completion of this tour, Meadows was assigned to Fort Benning, GA., where on April 14, 1967, he received a direct appointment to Captain. Meadows subsequently returned to Vietnam for a second MACV/SOG tour, and once again returned to Fort Benning, where he served with the Ranger Department.

In 1970, Meadows was chosen by two of his former commanders to participate in perhaps the most famous mission of the Vietnam War, Operation Ivory Coast. Brigadier General Donald Blackburn, the former commanding officer of MACV/SOG, and now Colonel "Bull" Simons, who had served under Blackburn in SOG, selected Meadows as the assault element leader for the raid of the Son Tay prison camp, 23 miles from Hanoi. Meadows' 14 man team intentionally crash landed its helicopter inside the camp walls, and seized and held the compound for 27 minutes in an attempt to rescue approximately 70 U.S. POW's.



No POWs were found in the camp, they had been moved several months earlier and controversy still surround the Son Tay mission. Some have called the efforts futile, yet the meticulous planning and preparation; the monumental efforts to coordinate Army, Air Force and Navy assets; and the almost total secrecy surrounding the operation have become a model for strategic surgical strike missions. What has never been disputed is the degree of dedication and valor exhibited by those men who volunteered for the mission. Also beyond dispute is the mission's impact on the world and North Vietnam in particular,

demonstrating the national resolve and determination of the United States to rescue its POWs.

Following the raid at Son Tay, Meadows was promoted to major and served a tour in the 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group. He concluded his military career in 1977 as the Training Officer and Deputy Commander for the jungle phase of Ranger School at Camp Rudder, Eglin Air Force Base, Florida.

Having retired with 30 years of service, 24 of them in Special Operations, Meadows continued to serve U.S. national interests as a special consultant for the organization and establishment of the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Operational Detachment – Delta, which was under the command of Colonel Charlie Beckwith.

Again, Dick Meadows was the right man, in the right place, at exactly the right time. He was instrumental in the planning, the preparation and the execution of Operation Eagle Claw. On April 24, 1980, nearly 200 members of a U.S. joint special operations task force infiltrated Iran by air in an attempt to rescue 53 Americans held hostage in the American Embassy in Tehran. For more than a week prior to the rescue attempt, Dick Meadows had been on the ground conducting clandestine mission support activities in and around Tehran. Again a volunteer, he was operating undercover as an Irish citizen working for a European auto company.

At the time, Eagle Claw was the largest and most audacious response by any world power to the emerging threat of terrorism. Regrettably, a disastrous aircraft collision at Desert One claimed the lives of eight personnel, forcing the mission to be aborted. Although the mission failed, the courage and commitment of Meadows and his fellow rescuers did not.

After the aborted hostage rescue mission, Meadows broke off official employment with the military, but he continued to help organize other special mission units and served as a consultant in the U.S. efforts to thwart criminal drug trafficking. He worked for a short period for H. Ross Perot, advising and assisting him on security matters.

More recently, Meadows had worked in Central and South American countries, training security personnel in everything from basic security procedures to antiterrorist precautions.

The resume of Dick Meadows remarkable career captures the highlights of recent special operations history. But what it cannot capture are his depth and strength of character: Despite his consummate achievements, Meadows remained a modest individual who was more interested in his next mission than his past accomplishments. While others in special operations sought fame, Dick Meadows, who contributed greatly to the legacy of U.S. Special Operations, religiously maintained a low profile and avoided the press. Because of his humbleness, his dedication and his accomplishments, Dick Meadows will endure as a personification of the “Quiet Professional”.

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*This article appeared in the January 1996 issue of Special Warfare, pp 42-44.*

## Son-Tay Raid – 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Twenty-five years ago on 20 November, U.S. Commandos conducted a daring raid into North Vietnam. President Richard M. Nixon, following deep consultations two days earlier with National Security Advisor, Henry A. Kissinger, CIA Director Richard M. Helms; Defense Secretary Melvin Laird; and Chairman of the Joint Staff Admiral Thomas Moorer, approved Operation KINGPIN. The objective was for Special Forces personnel to assault the Son-Tay prisoner-of-war camp 23 miles west of Hanoi, North Vietnam, and free prisoners. Delayed on time previously for political reasons, this time the mission, an archetypical event of the Vietnam War, was approved.

Preparations for the mission had already commenced. Following a meeting with Colonel Arthur D. “Bull” Simons and Brigadier General Donald Blackburn with SACSA (Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities) at the Pentagon, they returned respectively to Fort Bragg, NC and Eglin AFB, FL to recruit volunteers from their respective services for this mission.

The first two assistants desired by “Bull” Simons were LTC Elliot P. “Bud” Sydnor as his deputy, and Captain Richard J. Meadows to lead the assault force.

Despite discrete announcements and word-of-mouth notices, more than 500 Special Forces volunteers attending the post theater at Fort Bragg to hear what Colonel Simons wanted for a “moderately hazardous duty mission.” He had enough volunteers.

A feasibility study group was formed by Simons on 10 June.



The mission for a ‘Joint Contingency Task Group’ named IVORY COAST was approved on 8 August, with the Ivory Coast Planning Group convening on 10 August in Washington. A vacant, remote area of Eglin AFB was selected for training rehearsals. A moveable mock-up of the Son-Tay compound was erected – able to be dismantled and hidden during known overheard satellite flights.

As the raid was departing, a “Controlled American Source” {CAS} agent in North Vietnam reported that Son-Tay was empty. The CAS agent had an asset within the North Vietnam Enemy Proselytizing Office. The asset had reported a list of current prisoner of war camps, and Son-Tay was not listed. He said that 150 POWs had been moved to Dong-Hai.

The raid was eminent, and a delay would be disastrous.

# DARING POW RAID AT SON TAY

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On Nov. 21, 1970, top officials in Washington held their breath as a joint U.S. Army - Air Force rescue team attempted to free U.S. POWs from captivity in North Vietnam.

"We are going to rescue 70 American prisoners-of-war, maybe more, from a camp called Son Tay," announced Col. Arthur "Bull" Simons, combat veteran of World War II, Korea and Vietnam. "You are to let nothing interfere with this operation. Our mission is to rescue prisoners, not to take prisoners. If there's been a leak, we'll know it as soon as the second or third chopper sets down ... We'll make them pay for every foot".

When Simons finished his speech, the room fell silent for a brief moment. Then every man applauded. The raid on Son Tay Prison Camp - deep within North Vietnam - was under way.

In May 1970, two POW camps were identified by the Interagency Prisoner of War Intelligence Committee (IPWIC). This committee, formed in 1967, was responsible for identifying POWs and the camps they were interned in, and to veer bombing missions away from those areas.

The two camps were Ap Lo, about 30 miles west of Hanoi, and Son Tay, 23 miles from North Vietnam's capital, situated at the junction of the Song Con and Red Rivers. It was determined that Son Tay was being enlarged because of the increased activity at the camp.

Intelligence confirmed that 55 POWs were being confined at Son Tay. Photo reconnaissance discovered the letters SAR (Search and Rescue), apparently spelled out by the prisoner's laundry, and an arrow with the number 8, indicating the distance the men had to travel to the fields they worked in.

On May 25, IPWIC briefed Army General Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), on a tentative plan to free the POWs at Son Tay.

By 1970, the war was in its fifth year.

Public support was waning, and a daring rescue of POWs would be a much-needed morale booster militarily; not to mention a political victory for President Richard M. Nixon who was under fire for his recent incursion into Cambodia.

## **Operation Polar Circle**

Wheeler granted the request. Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, the new JCS chairman, sat in on the meeting. The first phase of the plan, dubbed "Operation Polar Circle" was approved.



On June 10, a 15-man group, headed by Air Force Brig. Gen. Donald D. Blackburn, began the planning stage of the operation. Blackburn, no stranger to special operations, was the special assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (CSA).

Reconnaissance photos taken by SR-71 "Blackbirds" revealed that Son Tay "was active". The camp itself was in the open and surrounded by rice paddies. In close proximity was the 12th North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Regiment totaling approximately 12,000 troops. Also nearby were an artillery school, a supply depot, and an air defense installation.

Five hundred yards south was another compound called the "secondary school", which was an administration center housing 45 guards. To make matters more difficult, Phuc Yen Air Base was only 20 miles northeast of Son Tay.

It was evident that the raid would have to be executed swiftly.

If not, the Communists could have planes in the air and a reactionary force at the camp within minutes.

Son Tay itself was small and was situated amid 40-foot trees to obstruct the view. Only one power and telephone line entered it.

The POWs were kept in four large buildings in the main compound. Three observation towers and a 7-foot wall encompassed the camp.

Because of its diminutive size, only one chopper could land within the walls. The remainder would have to touch down outside the compound. Another problem the planning group had to consider was the weather. The heavy monsoon downpours prohibited the raid until late fall. Finally, November was selected because the moon would be high enough over the horizon for good visibility, but low enough to obscure the enemy's vision.

### **Operation Ivory Coast**

With the planning stage completed, the next phase of the raid, called Ivory Coast, was ready to swing into action. Air Force Brig. Gen. Leroy J. "Roy" Manor, a stickler for organization, led the group.

The National Security Agency (NSA) tracked the NVA air defense systems and artillery units nearby.

Also, in addition to the "Blackbirds", unmanned Buffalo Hunter "Drones" flew over the camp as well, although they had to cease flying because many feared that the NVA would spot them.

In July, an SR-71 photo recon mission depicted "less active than usual" activity in the camp. On Oct. 3, Son Tay showed very little signs of life.

However, flights over Dong Hoi, 15 miles to the east of Son Tay, were picking up increased activity. The planners were scratching their heads. Had the POWs been moved? Had the NVA picked up signs that a raid was imminent?

In fact, the POWs had been relocated to Dong Hoi, July 14, but not for the reasons the planners had anticipated. The Song Con River, where Son Tay was located, had begun to overflow its banks.

So because of the flooding problem, the prisoners were transported to Dong Hoi.

### **Operation Kingpin**

Operation Kingpin, the final component of the raid, was approved by Nixon on Nov. 18. Next day, however, Adm. Moorer was notified that it had been confirmed that the POWs had been transferred. Unfortunately, the planners nixed the idea to move on Dong Hoi.

Their reasoning was that the raiders had rehearsed on Son Tay all this time, and changing to Dong Hoi at the last minute might cause catastrophic results.

On Nov. 21, 1970, at approximately 11:18 p.m., the Son Tay raiders, accompanied by C-130Es called Combat Talons, departed Udorn, Thailand, for the final phase of their mission. At the same time, the U.S. Navy began a huge carrier strike against North Vietnam to divert attention away from the raiding party. As the group neared the prison, the two "Jolly Greens", dubbed "Apple-4" and "Apple-5" hovered at 1,500 feet to act as reserve flareships in the event the C-130s' flares did not ignite.

Suddenly, Col. Frederick M. "Marty" Donohue's HH-53 helicopter, call sign "Apple-3", developed trouble. Without warning, a yellow trouble light appeared signaling transmission problems.

Donohue calmly informed his co-pilot, Capt. Tom Waldron, to "ignore the SOB". In a normal situation, Donohue would have landed. But this was no normal mission. "Apple-3" kept going. As Donohue's chopper "floated" across Son Tay's main compound, the door gunners let loose 4,000 rounds a minute from their mini-guns. The observation tower in the northwest section of the camp erupted into flames. With that, Donohue set down at his "holding point" in a rice paddy just outside the prison.

As Maj. Herb Kalen tried to negotiate a landing inside the compound, the almost lost control of his chopper, call sign "Banana-1" that was carrying the assault group code-named "Blueboy".

The 40-foot trees that surrounded Son Tay were, in actuality, much larger. "One tree", a pilot remembered, "must have been 150 feet tall ... we tore into it like a big lawn mower. There was a tremendous vibration ... and we were down."

Luckily, only one person was injured; a crew chief suffered a broken ankle. Regaining his composure, Special Forces Capt. Richard Meadows scurried from the downed aircraft and said in a calm voice through his bullhorn: "We're Americans. Keep your heads down. We're Americans. Get on the floor. We'll be in your cells in a minute."

No one answered back, though. The raiders sprung into action immediately. Automatic weapons ripped into the guards. Other NVA, attempting to flee, were cut down as they tried to make their way through the east wall.

Fourteen men entered the prison to rescue the POWs. However, to their disappointment, none were found.

### **Furious Firefights**

As the raiders were neutralizing the compound, Lt. Col. John Allison's helicopter, call sign "Apple-2", with the "Redwine" group aboard, was heading toward Son Tay's south wall. As his door gunners fired their mini-guns on the guard towers, Allison wondered where "Apple-1" was.

Code-named "Greenleaf", it was carrying "Bull" Simons. Allison put his HH-3 inside the compound and the Special Forces personnel streamed down the rear ramp.

Wasting no time, they blew the utility pole and set up a roadblock about 100 yards from the landing zone (LZ). A heated firefight ensued. Guards were "scurrying like mice" in an attempt to fire on the raiders. In the end, almost 50 NVA guards were killed at Son Tay.

"Apple-1", piloted by Lt.Col. Warner A. Britton, was having troubles of its own. The chopper had veered off the mark and was 450 meters south of the prison and had erroneously landed at the "secondary school."

Simons knew it wasn't Son Tay. The structures and terrain were different and, to everyone's horror, it was no "secondary school" - it was a barracks filled with enemy soldiers - 100 of whom were killed in five minutes.

As the chopper left, the raiders opened up with a barrage of automatic weapons. Capt. Udo Walther cut down four enemy soldiers and went from bay to bay riddling their rooms with his CAR-15. Realizing their error, the group radioed "Apple-1" to return and pick up the raiders from their dilemma.

Simons, meanwhile, jumped into a trench to await the return of Britton when an NVA leaped into the hole next to him. Terrified, and wearing only his underwear, the Vietnamese froze. Simons pumped six shells from his .357 Magnum handgun into the trooper's chest, killing him instantly.

Britton's chopper quickly returned when he received the radio transmission that Simon's group was in the wrong area. He flew back to Son Tay and deposited the remained of the raiders there.

Things were beginning to wind down. There was little resistance from the remaining guards.

Meadows radioed to LTC Elliot P. "Bud" Sydnor, the head of the "Redwine" group on the raid, "negative items". There were no POWs. They had been on the ground exactly 27 minutes.

The Son Tay raid was over.

What Went Wrong?

Why had the raid on Son Tay failed?

According to historian Dale Andrade: "... the fact that initially the CIA, DIA and NSA would all be involved sounded like a good idea. But, in reality, they only muddied the waters of the planning and got in each other's way". Another important factor was the seemingly never-ending poor weather. That's why the POWs had been relocated from Son Tay in the first place; because of the rapidly rising waters near the camp. Even Manor wrote in his after-action report that "five years of typhoons moved into the area of North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and Laos" in the months just prior to the raid.

What most did not know was that a top-secret "weather modification" experiment named Operation Popeye was responsible for some of the inclement weather.

Aircraft had been dropping "cloud-seeding paraphernalia" in the region, and the missions over Laos had doubled in 1970.

"Why didn't top officials in the CIA and Air Force tell the JCS and the Ivory Coast Task Force about Operation Popeye?" wrote Dale Andrade. "That gap in the knowledge of the planners could have endangered not only the live POWs in the area, but also the lives of the raiders.

"What really stands out in my mind," remarked Special Forces Sgt. Terry Buckler, a member of the raiding party, "was the dedication the guys had. I was the youngest person on the raid, so I felt my life was unimportant. But the others had family. And they could have gotten off the mission at any time. That impressed me. These guys were willing to lay down their lives for their comrades. They were true professionals."

**NOTE:** Extracted from the VFW magazine, November 1995, story by Al Hemingway.



**Courage, skill, dedication and love of country combined to make Maj. Richard Meadows ...**

# *A Special Kind of Hero*

*Story by Heike Hasenauer*

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*RETIRED Maj. Richard Meadows lived a life punctuated by adventure, danger and intrigue. When he died of leukemia in July, only hours before he was to receive the Presidential Citizens Medal, the special operations community lost a legend.*

*"I see him as the same hero they saw," said his son, Capt. Mark Meadows, commander of Company F, 51st Infantry Regiment, a long-range surveillance unit attached to XVIII Airborne Corps' 519th Military Intelligence Battalion at Fort Bragg, N.C.*

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*"When he came out of the Korean War at 19, he was a master sergeant. Special forces cranked up, he got involved and became intrigued with long-range reconnaissance and special forces stuff," Mark said.*

*President Bill Clinton, in a letter to the elder Meadows before his death, wrote, "In Korea, Vietnam, Iran and many other dangerous locales, you established a legendary reputation that will forever be hallowed within the special forces and by all Americans who know of your extraordinary exploits."*

*Shortly after Meadows' death, Clinton, in a public statement, wrote, "I am pleased that Maj. Meadows knew of [the presidential honor] before his death."*

*In the citation that accompanied the award, presented to Meadows' family, Clinton wrote: "His exceptional special forces and civilian career included operations behind enemy lines in Vietnam for which he received a rare battlefield commission, leadership in a daring rescue attempt of POWs at Son Tay Prison near Hanoi, infiltration into Tehran for the Desert One hostage rescue mission, and a key role in establishing the elite Delta Force."*

*The elder Meadows joined the Army at 15 and spent more than 30 years serving his country -- most of it in Special Forces and ranger positions. He fought in the Korean War, and became its youngest master sergeant.*

*In 1953, he joined the 10th Special Forces Group and, in 1960, became the first NCO to participate in an exchange program between the 7th SFG and the British army's elite 22nd Special Air Service Regt.*

*In 1961 Meadows deployed to Laos as part of the White Star mobile training team that spent six months teaching combat tactics to the Royal Lao Army and Laotian tribal guerillas.*

*During three tours in Vietnam Meadows conducted numerous cross-border reconnaissance and commando missions. He also helped write the operations plan for the daring raid to free American POWs from Son Tay Prison, near Hanoi, in which he served as assault team leader.*

*His actions in Southeast Asia so impressed the senior U.S. commander in Vietnam, Gen. William Westmoreland, that he obtained approval for Meadows' direct commission to captain. It was the first battlefield commission to be given during the Vietnam War.*

*Meadows' last assignment was at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., in 1977, where he was the training officer and deputy commander of the jungle phase of Ranger School.*

*But his special operations career was far from over.*

*Meadows traveled to Iran in 1980 during the Iran hostage crisis and, as a U.S. Army consultant, posed as a foreign businessman to scout the American Embassy in Tehran where the hostages were being held. That mission was aborted when three of eight Navy helicopters involved experienced system failures.*

*Meadows' many military awards and decorations include: the Distinguished Service Cross, two Silver Stars, Bronze Star with Valor Device, Air Medal, Legion of Merit, Meritorious Service Medal, Joint Service Commendation Medal, Combat Infantry Badge, Ranger Tab, Scuba Badge and numerous foreign awards.*

*The man who, in the words of U.S. Special Operations Command commander Gen. Wayne Downing, "made extraordinary contributions to the security of the nation" was remembered at a July reunion of the Son Tay Raid Association at Hurlburt Field, Fla. During the reunion, Meadows was inducted into the Army Ranger Hall of Fame.*

*Attendees included Meadows' widow, Dr. Pamela Meadows; son, Major Meadows; daughter, Michele Gilmore; and USSOCOM's Downing, who made the presentations.*

## **A SPECIAL WARRIOR'S LAST PATROL:**

### **Dick Meadows**

by Maj. John L. Plaster, USAR (Ret.)

It was perfect timing. Dick Meadows phoned not a dozen days after I'd finished two year's work on a history of SOG. At last we could start his twice-postponed biography.

And what a tale to tell: Project White Star, SOG, the Son Tay Raid, Delta Force, the drug wars - - Meadows had lived one adventure after another, dodging bullets on three continents for 45 years. In our caricature world of hoo-yah Rambos, Dick was genuine and unassuming, the boy next door with a CAR-15, America's Otto Skorzeny or David Sterling. No matter his rank -- master sergeant, captain, major -- all of us in Special Forces knew him as Dick Meadows, a man who didn't need a rank to be who he was; Meadows was Meadows.

It would be a fabulous book. "But I have a problem," Meadows announced, his soft voice hinting nothing special. "I'm dying, John."

A brick couldn't have hit so hard. Ten days earlier he'd been in Central America when fatigue so overwhelmed him that he came home. His doctor-diagnosed leukemia, in its final, most virulent stage. That simply couldn't be. Though 64, Meadows looked two decades younger, fit, trim and vigorous.

"How long do you have?" I asked. "A week." True to his word, six days later Dick Meadows died. A Self-Made Soldier there was no one like Dick Meadows. He lived the life on which books are written -- in the plural. Born in a dirt-floor West Virginia moon shiner's cabin, in 1947 Meadows lied his age to become a 15-year-old paratrooper, then so distinguished himself in Korea that he was that war's youngest master sergeant, at age 20. The quick learning but largely self-taught Green Beret acquired such a descriptive vocabulary and sophisticated style that it surprised people to learn he had only a ninth-grade education.

The British SAS, with whom Meadows served two years on exchange in the late fifties, thought so much of him that they entrusted him with serious responsibilities. In fact, an SAS sergeant major entrusted him with his daughter, Pamela, for a bride.

In the early sixties he deployed covertly with other Green Berets to Laos where, led by Colonel Arthur 'Bull' Simons, they trained Kha Tribes men to fight the Pathet Lao and NVA. These Project White Star men were withdrawn when Laos was declared 'neutral' at a Geneva Conference.

SOG Team Leader Extraordinaire It was in SOG -- the top secret Studies and Observations Group, the Vietnam War's covert special operations unit -- that Meadows really shined. He spent two years in SOG, all of it running missions deep behind enemy

lines in Laos and North Vietnam while leading Chinese Nung mercenaries on Recon Team Iowa. Before each operation, Meadows built a terrain map in the dirt, then had his whole team memorize the prominent features. "Meadows did everything meticulously, everything was rehearsed," then-Major Scotty Crerar recalls. "You could have taken a film of [his] mission preparation and used it as a training film."

Like a martial arts master certain of his abilities, Meadows possessed an un-egotistical confidence -- fearless but not oblivious to danger. He was a practitioner of the tactically sublime; able to assess a situation in a glance, weigh his alternatives and act in a flash. "Just back from another successful covert mission along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, Meadows (back row, third from left), poses with Recon Team Iowa. Much of Meadows' reputation evolved from capturing prisoners, at which according to then-Colonel Jack Singlaub, Meadows proved SOG's most prolific prisoner snatcher, bringing back 13 NVA from Laos. He once arrayed Recon Team Iowa beside a trail when instead of the desired one man, five NVA strolled up and stopped right there for lunch. Meadows stepped out and announced, "Good morning, gentlemen. You are now POWs."

Despite his warning, "No, no, no!" Three went for their AKs. "Yes, yes, yes," Meadows shot them faster than you read this. The other two proved surprisingly compliant. "Meadows is cunning," thought one of SOG's most accomplished combat leaders, then-Captain Ed Lesesne, who adds with a touch of awe, "he's a killing machine, and I mean to tell you -- Meadows is a calculating, cool guy."

Chief SOG Donald 'Headhunter' Blackburn, a highly decorated WWII guerrilla leader, so admired Meadows that he thought of him as a son. Battlefield Commission Meadows had a knack for making history, as in 1966 when he proved North Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong a liar. Pham had been insisting not a single North Vietnamese soldier had been sent to South Vietnam, telling U.S. anti-war activist Tom Hayden such allegations were, "a myth fabricated by the U.S. imperialists to justify their war of aggression." Pham's deceit seemed by its magnitude unbreachable. Was this a war of conquest from the North, or a popular revolt by South Vietnam's peasantry?

General William Westmoreland couldn't offer Congressional doubters a 'smoking gun.' Then Meadows helped out. Lying beside Laotian Highway 110, his RT Iowa was watching North Vietnamese soldiers and porters pass by. Meadows pulled from his pocket a Pen-EE camera, crawled forward and snapped a whole roll of photos.

Then he and his assistant team leader, Chuck Kearns, crawled back beyond enemy earshot and Meadows decided on an even more dangerous gambit; in Kearns' rucksack was an 8mm motion picture camera, which he'd brought along on a lark. Meadows took it, crept perilously close to the trail and began rolling, shooting a few frames of each NVA that came into his viewfinder, footage of such perfect exposure that it came out like mug shots. For an hour Meadows lay there and recorded nearly a whole battalion -- hundreds of heavily armed North Vietnamese -- marching alongside porters toting loads of military supplies.



Chief SOG had Meadows personally brief his findings to Gen. Westmoreland, who couldn't help but praise Meadows and SOG. Meadows' film was rushed to Washington and presented in a closed-door briefing of select Congressmen who nodded convinced that Hanoi was lying.

A few months later Meadows penetrated an NVA Laotian cache which contained Russian-made artillery pieces. The Howitzers were too big to carry back, even for Meadows, so he photographed them and brought out their sights. Again Chief SOG had Meadows brief Westmoreland, who almost hugged the intense Green Beret master sergeant when he presented a souvenir: A Soviet-made artillery sight. Westmoreland noted, it was exactly such evidence "which finally prompted the State Department to relax its restrictions on firing into the DMZ."

"Shortly after receiving his battlefield direct commission from Gen. (Photo courtesy of Jim Storter) Deeply impressed by the sincere, quiet-spoken Green Beret, Westmoreland gave Meadows a direct commission to captain -- the Vietnam War's first battlefield commission -- and cited him by name in his memories.

In October 1966, Chief SOG Jack Singlaub chose Meadows to lead SOG's first American-led operation into the heartland of North Vietnam, to rescue a downed U.S. Navy fighter pilot. Lieutenant Deane Woods had parachuted onto a heavily jungled ridgeline halfway between Vinh and Hanoi, 30 miles inland, where for several days he'd been evading NVA searchers. Launching by Navy helicopter off the carrier Intrepid, Meadows took in a 13-man team that made it within 500 yards of Lt. Woods when the NVA captured him.

"A cautious soldier would have taken his men to the nearest extraction point and departed enemy territory," Chief SOG Singlaub says. "But Meadows was not overly cautious." Coming upon a major trail, Meadows set up an ambush to capture a prisoner. Shortly, an NVA officer and three soldiers walked up; alert, still searching for Woods, apparently unaware he'd been captured.

To the NVA soldiers' astonishment Meadows stepped from the dense foliage, leveled his AK-47, and called a friendly, "Good morning." As one, all four NVA went for their guns, but Meadows shot first, killing them all in blur. While his men searched the bodies, Meadows radioed for an exfil and soon they were on their way out.

After the war, Meadows met Lt. Woods, who'd spent six years as a POW, and presented him with the Tokarev pistol he'd taken off the dead NVA officer. "Meadows proved to be SOG's most prolific prisoner snatcher, bringing back 15 NVA from Laos, including this one he's handcuffing for a flight to Saigon." (Photo by Medal of Honor winner, George K. Sisler)

## **POW Rescue at Son Tay**

Meadows' best-known mission had to be the Son Tay Raid, the November, 1970 attempted rescue of American POWs from a prison 23 miles west of Hanoi. Meadows didn't merely lead the assault element, but served as the primary trainer of the entire raiding force, teaching them everything he'd learned about close quarters combat and small unit tactics. When the raiders landed at Son Tay, it was Meadows' voice on the megaphone that called, "We're Americans. Keep your heads down. This is a rescue.... We'll be in your cells in a minute."

But Son Tay was empty, its POWs moved while the camp was being refurbished. Though an intelligence failure, the raid boosted POW morale and compelled Hanoi, at last, to cease mistreating American prisoners. Son Tay inspired the Israeli rescue mission six years later at Entebbe, right down to the megaphone instructions to captives.

### **Our Man in Tehran**

Dick Meadows retired with 30 years service in 1977, but he couldn't stay away long, especially when Colonel 'Chargin' Charlie Beckwith asked him to be the civilian trainer of his newly formed counter-terrorist unit, Delta Force. The adaptable Meadows applied all he knew of long range raiding, recon and close combat, and modified it to fit the terrorism environment, resulting in the world's most respected counter-terrorist organization.

Meadows, (left, with megaphone), trains at Eglin AFB, Fla., with the famous Son Tay Raiders for the 1970 attempt to rescue American POWs just 23 miles west of Hanoi. In the background is the prison mockup (USAF photo)

He retired again in 1980, then a few months later came back to assist Delta's hostage rescue in Iran. The Carter Administration had gutted the CIA of operatives capable of reconning the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, leaving Delta Force planners without the tactical details they needed. A CIA bureaucrat initially rejected Meadows as a covert advance man, calling him, "An amateur with poor cover, poor backup and poor training." Meadows told the CIA he'd go into Tehran with or without their assistance. Given those options, CIA Director Stansfield Turner approved Meadows and had him issued a false Irish passport. Apparently, Iranian immigration couldn't tell the difference between an Irish brogue and West Virginia twang, because they waved Meadows -- posing as 'Richard Keith,' a European auto executive -- right through customs. Meadows surveilled the U.S. Embassy reconned Delta Force's planned route into the city and watched for any hint of hostile counter-surveillance at the warehouse in which the CIA and a Green Beret advance team had hidden Delta's trucks and gear.

Meadows would guide the Delta raiders then join them in the assault -- but they never got to him. Deep in the Iranian desert, Delta's mission was aborted, two aircraft collided and its helicopters had to be abandoned. But in their rush to escape, the chopper pilots haphazardly left behind documents that disclosed Meadows' warehouse

location. Due to satellite communications problems, Meadows did not learn what had happened for 24 hours and barely escaped into Turkey.

Meadows also played a yet undisclosed role in the 1979 rescue of two H. Ross Perot employees from an Iranian prison, a mission led by his old boss, Colonel Arthur 'Bull' Simons, which was the basis of Ken Follett's 1983 bestseller, "On Wings of Eagles."

"Virtually no one outside the black ops and Special Forces community knew of Dick Meadows until he made the cover of Newsweek in the early 1980s."

### **Meadows Last Patrol**

Despite an affinity for bass fishing, Meadows still could not retire. In the mid-1980s he volunteered to operate an aircraft-refueling front in the Caribbean to ensnare Columbian drug cartel smugglers. Then he operated for a decade in Peru, helping plantation owners and businesses defend themselves from Sendero Luminosa terrorists who'd have nothing more than put a bullet through him -- they never got close.

Twice he told me he'd become frustrated by inadequacies in the War on Drugs, and doubted U.S. sincerity. Though he was not on the U.S. Government payroll, many times over the past decade he helped 'the community' in ways which must remain unsaid. Several times he negotiated the release of kidnap victims in South America.

Within weeks of his death, Meadows was still active in Central America.

During his career he'd been awarded every U.S. valor award except the Medal of Honor. "If he hadn't done so many things that are classified, he'd been the most decorated soldier in the Army," Colonel Elliot 'Bud' Sydnor, the ground force commander at Son Tay, told Newsweek magazine for a 1982 cover story.

When H. Ross Perot learned of Meadows' imminent death, he reportedly phoned President Clinton to see that he was awarded the Presidential Citizens Medal. It was presented posthumously to his family by the U.S. Special Operations Command commander, General Wayne Downing, who relayed the President's condolences and called Meadows, "one of America's finest unsung heroes."

### **Statement by President Clinton**

'I mourn the passing today of Major Richard J. Meadows, USA (ret.), whose dedicated and exceptional service is cherished by everyone who knew of his extraordinary courage and selfless service.'

I recently asked General Wayne Downing, the Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Special Operations Command, to present the Presidential Citizens Medal to Major Meadows. I am gratified to know that Major Meadows' wife, Pamela, and son, Mark, a U.S. Army captain, and his daughter Michelle, will receive this award tonight at a gathering of those involved in the Son Tay Raid at Hurlbert Field. Although this now will be a posthumous award, I am pleased

that Major Meadows knew of this honor before he died. To Major Meadows' family and friends and to the Special Operations community, I extend my heartfelt condolences. We will all remember him as a soldier's soldier and one of America's finest unsung heroes.

Facing the certainty of death in his last week, he told me, "It's like I'm preparing for one last patrol." In those final days, Gen. Downing assured Meadows there would be a SOCOM award for young special operators to commemorate his name.

Having come so close at Son Tay and in Tehran, Dick once told me his only unfulfilled wish in life was, "To lead one that succeeded." That's the job now for younger men he and his record will inspire, perhaps a recipient of the award that bears his name.

# Statement from President Clinton

## **THE WHITE HOUSE**

Office of the Press Secretary

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For Immediate Release July 29, 1995

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I mourn the passing today of Major Richard J. Meadows, USA (Ret.) whose dedicated and exceptional service is cherished by everyone who knew of his extraordinary courage and selfless service.

I recently had asked General Wayne Downing, the Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Special Operations Command, to present the Presidential Citizens Medal to Major Meadows. I am gratified to know that Major Meadows' wife Pamela, his son Mark, a U.S. Army captain, and daughter Michele will receive this award tonight at a gathering of those involved in the Son Tay raid at Hurlburt Field. Although this will now be a posthumous honor, I am pleased that Major Meadows knew of this honor before he died.

To Major Meadows' family and friends and to the Special Operations community, I extend my heartfelt condolences. We will all remember him as a soldier's soldier and one of America's finest unsung heroes.



### **Richard J. "Dick" Meadows Award**

The heritage of Special Operations has always rested, and still rests, on the quality of our soldiers, sailors, and airmen. Our Special Operations personnel are often called upon to perform extraordinary dangerous, high-risk missions that have great strategic value.

The success of these missions hinges on audacity, courage, ingenuity, leadership, and integrity. Many in our community have these values to one degree or another, but none more so than Richard J. "Dick" Meadows. Dick Meadows exemplifies all that is the best in the Special Operations Warrior.

During more than thirty years with the Army, from the Korean War through Vietnam to the Iranian Hostage Rescue attempt, Dick Meadows epitomized the meaning of the "Quiet Professional".

His battlefield actions are stories from which legends are made. His beginnings were of the most humble order. He was born and reared in a one-room shack without plumbing or electricity. He enlisted in the Army in 1947. Five years later, he became the youngest Master Sergeant in the Korean War.

During the Vietnam War, Dick Meadows served with the Military Assistance Command Vietnam – Studies and Observation Group, better known as MACV-SOG. He led teams on clandestine, cross-the-border missions into North Vietnam and Laos.

Because of his extraordinary combat record, General William Westmoreland awarded him a battlefield commission, the first of the war.

Dick Meadows was also a planner for and a leader of the Son Tay Raid, and was the first leader of the first assault team to land inside the prison compound.

Probably his most daring exploit came after he had retired from the military and was working as a consultant to the Army. Dick Meadows, posing as a foreign businessman, went to Iran during the hostage crisis in 1980. He scouted the American Embassy in Teheran where the hostages were being held and reconnoitered the Desert II site where he would link up with the rescue force and then escort them into the city.

After the tragic events at the Desert I site, Dick Meadows was able to make his escape from Teheran.

**Those with whom he served paid him the highest tributes:**

*"He made people feel they could do anything"*

*"I can categorically say Dick Meadows is the finest soldier I have ever served with. I would follow him anywhere."*

Dick Meadows is the epitome of the Special Operations Warrior. It is to his leadership, skill, bravery, daring, and intelligence that we commemorate with this award. Those who receive this award have demonstrated the same qualities of military professionalism, and embody that true spirit, daring leadership, élan, and self-sacrifice that are Dick Meadow's legacy to his comrades in arms.

*This award will be a replica of the " Dick" Meadows statue presented today.*

**General Henry H. Shelton, June 6, 1997**

# Perot helps honor Special Operator

By Henry Cunningham  
Military editor



H. Ross Perot helps honor the late Maj. Dick Meadows. Perot paid for the \$160,000 statue of Meadows at U.S. Army Special Operations Command headquarters on Fort Bragg.

Staff photo by Elizabeth Darwin Gatlin

H. Ross Perot on Friday helped unveil a statue at Fort Bragg of the late Maj. Dick Meadows, whom he described as "a James Bond in real life."

Lt. Gen. Peter Schoemaker said at the ceremony that Meadows was "one of the world's greatest special operators." Meadows, who died in 1995 at age 64, fought in the most secret special operations units of the Vietnam War and led teams on missions into Laos and North Vietnam. Gen. William Westmoreland awarded him the first battlefield commission of the war. Meadows was a leader of the unsuccessful 1970 Son Tay raid to rescue U.S. prisoners of war from North Vietnam and helped Col. Charlie Beckwith form the Delta Force at Fort Bragg in the late 1970s. During the 1980 attempt to rescue U.S. hostages in Iran, Meadows infiltrated into Tehran and posed as an Irish businessman to provide information to the U.S. rescue forces. He managed to escape Iran after the rescue was called off. "Someone in one of the speeches today said there should be a movie or a book about his life," Perot said after the ceremony. "There should be, because the American people have no idea. He really did these things that you see movie stars play the role doing." Perot paid for the \$160,000 statue on the Meadows Memorial Parade Field at the U.S. Army Special Operations Command headquarters near Yadkin and Reilly roads. The parade field adjoins the memorial plaza where stands the statue of the Special Forces soldier widely known as "Bronze Bruce." The 8-foot-tall, 900-pound bronze statue of Meadows is on a pedestal about 4 1/2-feet tall. It took about a year to complete, the sculptor said. Perot, who has been a strong supporter of special operations, said he first met Meadows when, at the request of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he visited the Son Tay raiders to thank them for their efforts. "Seldom in our lives are we privileged to know an individual of Dick Meadows' stature," said Gen. Hugh Shelton, commander in chief of U.S. Special Operations Command at Tampa, Fla. An award is being established in Meadows' honor for special operations soldiers, sailors and airmen for "extraordinary heroism," Shelton said. "Dick was the ultimate soldier," said retired Gen. Wayne A. Downing, former commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command, U.S. Army Special Operations Command and the Joint Special Operations Command.



Meadows was "the standard by which we will judge every special operator," Downing said. His widow, Pam (now Dr. Pam Meadows), who lives in Florida, described Meadows as a quite, humble man who loved his grandchildren and served his country without hesitation. The sculptor was Lawrence M. Ludtke of Houston. "I received some wonderful help, wonderful photographs," Ludtke said after the ceremony. "His son, Mark Meadows, was gracious enough to come to my studio and pose for me in the proper equipment. They provided me with everything I needed to make that as authentic as possible." Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Joseph W. Lupyak, a Son Tay raider, said, "It's an exact likeness. It's unbelievable. It looks just like Dick." Retired Sgt. Maj. Don Davis, said "He doesn't have a hat on. Dick didn't like to wear a hat." The statue carries a CAR-15 on semi-automatic to fire three-shot bursts. "I understand he didn't like to just spray (bullets)," the sculptor said. "He liked to keep it under control." The left arm is down; the right arm is pointing a weapon. "He's really just taking a short, cautious step forward," Ludtke said. "His left arm is saying, 'There's some danger ahead. If you stay back, I'll take care of it.'" The statue wears no insignia. "He's depicted here as if he's going on a mission," the sculptor said. "There's no insignia and no indication of rank, Army unit or anything. All of the metal pieces on there are covered so that they don't have any reflection. "Everything is as authentic as I can make it. Everything is exactly as he would wear going into combat."

## TRIBUTE TO A HERO

### MAJOR DICK MEADOWS "RANGER"

He is not gone, he is there, and there is a presence felt or imagined among the live oaks.

He is the silence that permeates the soul of those warriors past, present, and future on a sultry night at the Ranger Training Camp in Florida.

He is the scout in front of the point guard, alerting him of danger unseen.

He is the silent, awesome vision of a heavily armed, camouflaged figure rising through the mist of a rice paddy at first light.

He is there, but can't be seen as he moves silently and with deadly purpose through the jade and emerald green of a jungle.

He is the lone figure standing on a ridge lit by an artillery barrage on a dark and fearful night.

He is among the many in any city, but does not stand out. His presence is known by only those he has made aware.

He is the hope of every hostage prisoner that he may effect a rescue.

He is the experience every team leader must have as he instills confidence in his men.

He is the terrifying thunder that rolls over his country's enemies.

He is always there to comfort those in need, and guide those that are lost.

His spirit will always be there to show the way for the future legions called upon to protect and serve their country.

He is a legend and his feats will be talked about among his fellow service men as long as this Country and freedom survive.

I toast you Dick, for you are a true Hero.

R.G. "Bob" Davis,  
Major Retired

## **SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam**

### **Excerpts Chapter 3: First Blood**

In the fall of 1966, Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, III Marine Amphibious Force Commander, requested SOG's special recon help in and near the DMZ. During the just-completed Operations Hastings, the Marines had pushed two NVA divisions back toward the DMZ, then occupied two dominating positions just south of there, Con Thien and a hill mass dubbed as Rockpile.

These two outposts attracted masses of NVA and continuing artillery fire from the DMZ. There was great uncertainty about where the two NVA divisions have gone and some evidence the enemy was massing to seize South Vietnam's two northernmost provinces. The hills around Khe Sanh and the DMZ were so alive that Marine recon teams found it impossible to stay on the ground. Was the enemy massing, falling back, reinforcing, what? And where was his artillery? General Walt needed to know.

When SOG's recon teams packed their rucksacks to go north and support the Marines, they carried along a new item – wiretap devices. Over the past year, SOG teams had discovered dozens of enemy telephone lines along roads and trails, but until now they didn't have the wiretaps and cassette recorders. These taps could produce intelligence of inestimable value because landlines often carried messages too sensitive to transmit by radio – plus they might yield important clues for decrypting radio messages.

However, the NVA's ability to detect taps electronically was so great that, at least initially, any team that planted a tap was living on borrowed time. Eventually, the CIA induction tap devices, which rubber-coated pads over the wire to glean a recordable signal from its electrical field. The CIA induction wiretap was not electronically detectable.

Yet these operations remained fraught with hazard, because a landline phone system meant an NVA regiment or division was in the vicinity.

Wiretaps began with SOG's USMC support missions that fall of 1966 when General Walt's staff selected seventeen targets in the DMZ and adjacent areas in Laos. The first three SOG teams averaged less than three days on the ground, and two had to shoot their way out. The next three teams managed to avoid contact for just two and a half days; then all three fought quick engagements and escaped, with one team bringing back a POW.

On 28 September, an aggressive enemy force nearly overran a team near Khe Sanh, splitting the Americans and Nungs; Staff Sergeant Danny Taylor and two Nungs were never seen again.

Five days later, Recon Teams Colorado and Arizona were inserted by Marine helicopters near Khe Sahn. RT Colorado, with Sergeants Ted Braden, Jim Hetrick and J.D. Bath, went in first, just north of the Ben Hai River on the western end of the DMZ.

The choppers went back, picked up Master Sergeants Ray Echevarria and Jim Jones, One-Zero and One-One, plus Staff Sergeant Eddie Williams, One-Two, along with their Nungs, and again flew north, this time just seven miles. Riding with a Covey FAC overhead was Sergeant Major Paul Darcy.

The CH-46 Sea Knight carrying Arizona made it safely into the LZ and had just lifted away when the enemy opened fire from 360 degrees, all the way around LZ. Arizona had landed amid an entrenched NVA unit.

Heavy fire pinned down the team and kept the Marine helicopters at bay, with one bird taking 15 hits. Just 15 miles away, RT Colorado radio operator Jim Hetrick heard Echevarria's voice on the radio screaming, "Come and get us! You've got to come and get us!" Despite air strikes around them the heavy enemy fire couldn't be suppressed.

Finally RT Arizona One-Zero Echevarria's voice came back calm. "That's it, guys," he announced. "It's all over. Don't come in. You haven't got a chance." Eschevarria said they would never get out. "When I quit talking, put the stuff right on us," he told Covey Rider Darcy.

Minutes later U.S. fighter-bombers dumped their bomb loads across RT Arizona's position. There were no further radio transmissions. Outnumbered almost one hundred to one, the team had been swallowed whole, the first entire SOG team was lost to the enemy. Of the seven helicopters that tried to retrieve RT Arizona, six were hit, as was an A-1 Sky raider. Amazingly, none was shot down.

Three days later, RT Arizona's Yard interpreter was extracted, alive. He told de-briefers he had evaded capture with the team One-Two, Staff Sergeant Eddie Williams, after Echeverria and Jones were mortally wounded. Williams had taken an AK-47 bullet through his thigh and sapped his strength climbing a cliff, after which he took shelter in a cave and told the interpreter to get help. A few minutes later the interpreter heard AK fire and explosions near the cave, and then total silence.

A month later, an enemy POW told interrogators he'd seen a black man with a wounded thigh, hands tied behind his back and a noose around his neck being led through villages for public mockery until he was too ill to walk. Then he was executed.

Only three months passed since recon men first gathered to sin "Hey Blue\*" and already its final verse was crammed with names – Thorne, Laws, Sain, Reno, MacNamara, Fawcett, Taylor, Echeverria, Jones and Williams – and 1996 was far from over.

Meanwhile, RT Colorado's mission had been a resounding success. Not only did the team uncover several NVA base camps, but also they brought back seven cassettes of North Vietnamese phone conversations.

SOG wiretaps soon were recognized as incomparable intelligence sources. And despite the dramatic losses of recon men, SOG One-Zeroes were winning more than they were losing, particularly two who seemed to be able to pull off anything, Master Sergeants Gerald Wareing and Dick Meadows. General

Westmoreland was so impressed by both that he gave them direct commissions and cited them by name in his memoirs.

Under Wareing, RT Ohio had a recurring problem: "Wareing's team quit en masse every time he came back," Major Scotty Crerar said. "He did such hell-raising that they would quit."

Several times RT Ohio bumped into enemy right on their insert LZ, but instead of asking to be extracted to land elsewhere, Wareing fought his way through. "Wareing pulled that off a couple of times," Crerar reports. "Good instincts; he pulled it off."

A man of death-defying audacity, Wareing brought back almost a dozen enemy prisoners from Laos, a record bettered only by one RT Iowa One-Zero **Dick Meadows**.

They were a study in contrasts. Where Wareing was instinctive, Meadows was methodical. "Meadows did everything meticulously, everything was rehearsed. You could have taken a film of [his] mission preparation and used it as a training film," Major Crerar recalled.

When he came to Shining Brass in 1966, Meadows had been a professional soldier nineteen years, though he was only thirty-four. Born in a dirt-floor moon shiner's cabin in West Virginia, Meadows had lied about his age to become a fifteen year old paratrooper in 1947, then so distinguished himself in Korea that he was that war's youngest Master Sergeant.

Before an operation, Meadows would build a terrain map in the dirt, then have his whole team – Americans and Nungs – memorize the prominent features, all LZ's, streams and rally points. Then they'd take turns reciting the plan and pointing to sites in the model. "He would work them hard," Crerar said.

Much of Meadows's reputation came from his ability to capture prisoners; he held SOG's record – thirteen POWs snatched from behind enemy lines.

Despite his great emphasis on planning, though, Meadows could act with boldness when it was needed. He once had RT Iowa hidden beside a trail when five NVA strolled up and stopped right there for lunch. Meadows emerged and announced, "You are now POWs." Three of the NVA started for their AKs and Meadows shot all three dead instantly. The other two proved compliant.

Meadows also had a knack for being in the right place to make history. In 1966 he proved North Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong a flagrant liar. Early that year, Pham adamantly insisted that not a single North Vietnamese soldier was fighting in South Vietnam.

Lying beside Laotian Highway 110E, RT Iowa was watching North Vietnamese soldiers and porters file past when their One-Zero decided to take a chance. At great personal risk, Meadows pulled a Pen-EE camera from his pocket, crawled forward and snapped a whole roll of photos from such close range that the clicking shutter almost got him killed.

Then Meadows and his One-One, Chuck Kearns, crawled back beyond enemy earshot and Meadows decided on and even more dangerous gambit; in Kearns' rucksack was his personal 8mm motion-picture camera, which he'd brought along on a lark. Meadows crawled perilously close to the highway and began rolling. He shot a few perfectly exposed frames of each man who came into his viewfinder. For an hour Meadows lay there and recorded hundreds of heavily armed North Vietnamese marching alongside porters toting military supplies.

The color film was rushed to Washington. Chief SOG Colonel Jack Singlaub, who taken over from Colonel Don Blackburn in April 1996, had Meadows personally present his findings to General Westmoreland, who could not help but praise Meadows and SOG.

Meadows footage was shown before a closed-door briefing of select members of Congress who needed convincing that Hanoi was lying about its involvement in South Vietnam.

A few months later, Meadows went into a heavily patrolled area west of Khe Sanh and penetrated an enemy cache containing new artillery pieces and fire control equipment. The howitzers were too big to carry back, so he photographed them, then stripped them of sights.

Again Chief SOG had Meadows brief General Westmoreland. The intense young master sergeant presented Westmoreland a souvenir: A Soviet-made artillery sight from the Laotian cache. As General Westmoreland noted in his memoirs, it was such evidence "which finally prompted the State Department to relax its restrictions on firing into the DMZ.

Deeply impressed by the sincere, quiet-spoken Green Beret, Westmoreland recommended Meadows for a battlefield commission, promoting him to the rank of Captain.

It was only logical that Chief SOG chose Dick Meadows to lead SOG's first American operation into the heartland of North Vietnam.

## **Chapter 4 – Code Name Bright Light**

### **Excerpt from the SOG: Secret Wars**

Lieutenant Dean Woods' crippled A-1 Skyraider had limped within sight of the South China Sea, but the U.S. Navy pilot couldn't squeeze another mile out of her. Woods reached for the yellow handle between his legs and pressed himself back tight and one tug later he was flying in space, his ejection seat falling away.

For miles around, any North Vietnamese soldier could see Wood's propeller driven Skyraider plunge and explode as his parachute drifted went into the hills.

The tree in which Lieutenant Woods landed was on a heavily jungled ridgeline about halfway between Vinh and Hanoi and almost 30 miles inland, overlooking rice paddies and dikes and villages. Lieutenant Woods realized he was between the two bomb-pocked highways that carried supplies from Haiphong's docks to the Nu Gai Pass and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Both roads, he knew, would be crawling with troops; only about 15 miles away was the provincial capital, Thanh Hoa, which was certain to have a large garrison.

Woods turned on his emergency radio but the failing light told him he would see no rescue this day, 12 October 1996, so he put some distance between himself and his tell-tale chute draped in the tree and found a place to hide for the night.

It looked hopeful the next day. Escorted by A-1 Skyraiders and high-flying Navy F-4 Phantoms, a Sikorsky SH-3C Sea King helicopter whirred above the ridgeline until, at last, the crew chief could see Woods waving his arms beneath the heavy canopy. While the A-1s strafed approaching enemy patrols, the hovering Sea King lowered an extraction rig from its winch, but the harness kept snagging in the trees. By the time it was clear this would not work, there was not enough station time left to talk Woods ran to an open area where the helicopter could land, nor enough daylight to fly out to sea, refuel and return.

They wished him good luck until the next day. But the next day heavy fog and clouds blanketed the jungle around the Navy pilot, making rescue impossible, although a Navy plane communicated with him. All day, aircraft stood by, but the weather never broke.

Out in South China Sea, Seventh Fleet Commander Admiral Leroy Johnson decided he could not just stand by with one of his men in such jeopardy. That night, Admiral Johnson called General Westmoreland in Saigon, requesting a small force to land in Vietnam, search for the young aviator and fight through any enemy that tried to interfere.

Westmoreland phoned Chief SOG Colonel Singlaub. While Singlaub made preparations, political approval was sought, reportedly all the way to President Johnson. With that approval, Chief SOG called upon the best man he could imagine to lead the mission, One-Zero Dick Meadows.

It was midnight by the time a Navy C-2 Greyhound transport delivered Meadows and his reinforced RT Iowa to the heaving deck of the USS Intrepid, and it was just as well since the thirteen heavily armed SOG men did not want to arouse the unwanted speculation.

This was the first mission under the code name Bright Light – top-secret rescues of Americans from behind enemy lines – ever to be attempted in North Vietnam. But, once again, the weather refused to cooperate, and the SOG men could do little more than pace and hope for a break. It did not come.

Beneath the shielding cloud cover, the North Vietnamese continued searching for Lieutenant Woods, who was now suffering through his third day without food. Enough time had passed that the NVA had

trucked additional 37 mm and 57 mm antiaircraft guns to engage American rescue helicopters when they came, as the enemy knew they would. Several companies of NVA had arrived to reinforce local militia.

The next morning the clouds scattered, and just before dawn a pair of Navy Sea King helicopters lifted from the *Intrepid's* deck with Meadows and RT Iowa aboard. As the North Vietnamese coast took shape, there was an uncomfortable realization the ahead was a modern air-defense system whose radars already were tracking their approach and alerting antiaircraft units and ground forces who'd had four days to prepare for them.

When the helicopters crossed the coast, the sky exploded with antiaircraft shell bursts, but the Navy pilots expertly weaved between the worst of it. Minutes later they could see the heavily forested ridge where that very moment the NVA were converging on the downed flyer. After several false insertions to confuse the enemy, one Sea King inserted RT Iowa about 800 yards from Lieutenant Wood's hiding place. Meadows made a beeline for the ridge.

Meadows and his men moved fast and had close to a few hundred yards when they received a sickening radio report: The Navy pilot was captured. Had they traveled 500 miles only to come up 200 yards short? "A cautious soldier would have taken his men to the nearest extraction point and departed the enemy territory," Colonel Singlaub says. "But Meadows was not overly cautious."

Coming upon a major trail, Meadows decided to set up an ambush and capture a prisoner. A few moments later an NVA officer and three enlisted men walked up, alert, still searching for Woods, apparently unaware that he'd been captured.

Perhaps they expected a lone, injured pilot with just a pistol. They were astonished when Meadows stepped from the dense foliage and leveled his AF-47, calling a friendly good morning. As one, they all went for their guns, but Meadows shot first, killing all four in one blur. While his men searched the bodies, Meadows radioed for an exfil, and soon they were flying away, although their helicopter was sprayed by gunfire and eventually ditched near an American destroyer. From this, their first Bright Light mission, every man made it out. (After the war, Meadows met Lieutenant Woods, who'd spent six years as a POW, and presented him with the Tokarev pistol captured from the NVA officer he'd wished good morning on trail.)

It would be said Bright Light was Colonel Harry "Heinie" Aderholt's personal creation. Six months earlier, USAF General Hunter Harris, Pacific Air Force Commander, had challenged the experienced special operations officer to develop a concept: What to do after a Search and Rescue (SAR) effort came up empty-handed and one or more Americans were still evading, missing or taken prisoner. A recent Air Force study had found that 47 percent of all failed SARs resulted from slow reaction time by helicopters. If a rescue bird could not reach a downed airman within fifteen minutes, the chances of rescue were good, but if retrieval took more than thirty minutes, the downed airman's chances fell precipitously.



Colonel Aderhold decided a single office should handle all post SAR responsibilities, and it should be in SOG since this was the only joint service agency with assets and authorization to operate secretly throughout Southeast Asia. The Joint Chiefs agreed and, on 16 September 1966, authorized Aderholt to head SOG's OPS-80 section, to track MIAs, locate prison camps, attempt rescues and even offer bribes and ransoms to get Americans released. Because OPS-80 needed to coordinate with many non-SOG entities, it would operation behind its own special cover, the Joint Personnel Recovery Center (JPRC), a supposed staff section in MACV.

More than anything, though, Aderholt wanted to raid POW camps to liberate Americans.....\*\*

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\*The song "Hey Blue" originated in an NCO club to commemorate lost SOG teammates:

"At the Kontum FOB, there was a somber mixture of sympathy for Sergeant Harry Whlen, who hardly spoken, and grief over the lost men, Delmer Laws and Don Sain. No one wanted the anguish of a memorial ceremony, especially seeing how badly Whalen was taking it, but something had to be done, so the recon men just gathered at the NCO club. There were drinks, some roasts, someone proposed they sing a song, a sitting one for lost companions, fine Green beret recon men who'd given their all. It was a sort of taps, a closure; everyone in the club stood and sang, slow and sad. The song was "Hey, Blue."

*I had a dog his name was Blue.*

*Bet you five dollars,*

*He's a good dog, too.*

*Hey, Blue,*

*You're a good dog, you.*

Several succeeding the verses recalled Old Blue's life, loyalty, and companionship. Qualities like those that bonded the recon men to each other. Then Old Blue dies, and in that final verse, instead of calling the dog's name over his grave, all those gathered substituted the names of their lost comrades and sang sadly:

*Sain and Laws and Fawcett, too.*

*And Reno, Thorne and MacNamara, too.*

*Hey, friends,*

*You were good guys, you.*

As the war continued and SOG losses mounted, verse after verse of names were added, which like an oral history, reminded succeeding rotations of recon men who had gone before them. It was SOG's most solemn tradition...

\*\* This concept was the precursor of the infamous "Son Tay Raid" into North Vietnam on 20 November 1970 in which Captain Richard J. Meadows led an assault team into a prisoner of war camp to rescue 50 American POWs.

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### **Glossary of Select Terms**

**CCC** – (Combined and Control Central) SOG Base at Kontum, South Vietnam

**CCN** – (Combined and Control North) SOG Base at Ban Me Thout, South Vietnam

**Covey** – Call sign for USAF Forward Air Control units at Danang and Pleiku, which directly supported SOG cross-border missions.

**Covey Rider** – Longtime Special Forces recon man who flew with the USAF FACs to help direct air strikes, insert and extract SOG teams and monitor the Ho Chi Minh Trail corridor.

**DMZ** – Demilitarized Zone – a 14 mile strip separating North and South Vietnam

**One - One** – Code name for a SOG recon team assistant team leader.

**One - Two** – Code name for a SOG recon team radio operator.

**One - Zero** – Code name for a SOG recon team leader.

**Recon Team** - A SOG recon team typically consisted of three US Special Forces men and nine Nungs and Montagnards. To minimize detection, however, most One-Zeros took only six or eight men on each operation.

**SOG** – Studies and Observations Group: The Vietnam War's covert special warfare unit, essentially the OSS of Southeast Asia.

**Yard** – American slang for Montagnard tribesman.

