

AMERICA'S GREATEST SPECIAL OPS SOLDIER: MAJ. DICK MEADOWS

Find out why he's the only Green Beret with his own statue at Ft. Bragg

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 moonshiner'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 Tribesmen 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 These Project White Star men were withdrawn when Laos was declared 'neutral' at a Geneva Conference.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 unegotistical 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, so, '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.

Laying 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 mugshots. For an hour Meadows laid 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."

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 memoirs.

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.



"Shortly after receiving his battlefield direct commission from Gen. Westmoreland, Captain Meadows is all smiles." (Photo courtesy of Jim Storter)

"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. Momentarily, 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 one 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.

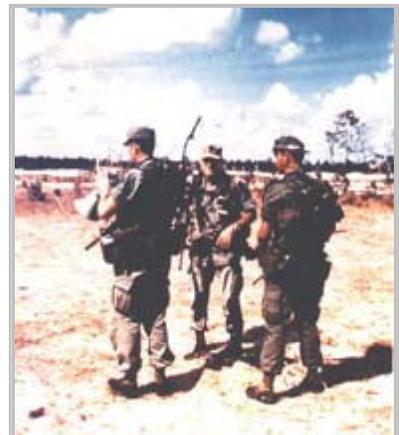
Our Man in Tehran

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.

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 company executive -- right through customs.



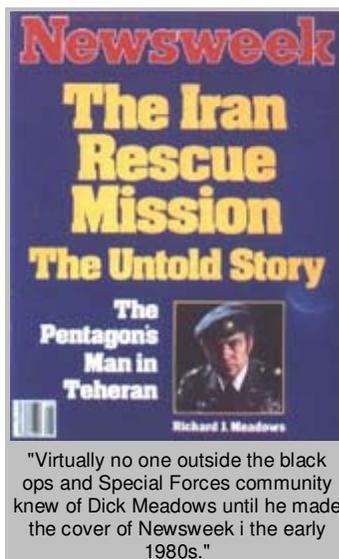
Meadows, (left, with megaphone), trains at Eglin AFB, Fla., with the famous Son Tay Raiders for the 1970 attempt to rescue American POWs just 23 miles west of Hanoi. In the background is the prison mockup. (USAF photo)

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."



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 liked 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 have 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."

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.

Presidential Citizens Medal Citation

"With courage, initiative and devotion to duty, Major Richard Meadows, USA (ret), has made extraordinary contributions to the security of this nation. After enlisting in the Army at the age of 15, he became the youngest Master Sergeant of the Korean War. 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. Repeatedly answering our country's call and taking on the most dangerous and sensitive missions, few have been as willing to put themselves in harm's way for their fellow countrymen."

*(s) William J. Clinton
[26 July 95]*

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's 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.