

## THE TRUE STORY OF OPERATION TAILWIND

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

In the late summer of 1970, the secret war in southern Laos had taken a turn for the worse. The North Vietnamese Army had seized the region's most critical terrain the Bolovens Plateau overrunning several CIA airfields and forward bases.



USMC CH-53s ready to go, Operation Tailwind.  
(Courtesy Eugene McCarley)

At an emergency meeting in Bangkok, the CIA's senior war planner told the visiting Chief SOG, Colonel John "Skip" Sadler, that two CIA-supported Hmong tribal battalions were trying to recapture the most important stronghold on the Bolovens Plateau, and "were getting the bejesus kicked out of them daily." With each passing day the danger grew that the entire Hmong force would be annihilated and with it any chance of recapturing southern Laos. In this critical situation, the CIA officer asked, could SOG insert a Hatchet Force raider company some 40 miles from the contested stronghold, and kick up such a ruckus in the NVA's rear that it would draw the enemy away?

There certainly wasn't an organization more fitting for such a top secret, covert mission. The Studies and Observations Group or SOG, based in South Vietnam, had been running American-led covert operations into Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam for five years. Raiding the heavily occupied Ho Chi Minh Trail corridor of eastern Laos was no small request but on the other hand, here was virgin territory; no SOG raider company had ever been so deep in Laos, so the possibilities seemed lucrative. But, Chief SOG Sadler noted, the target was beyond SOG's authorized operations area and they'd need special approval from the U.S. ambassador in Vientiane. "He's already approved it," the CIA officer announced. With the concurrence of the U.S. commander in Vietnam, General Creighton Abrams, Operation Tailwind, as it was codenamed, was a "go."



Each of the three USMC HH-53's carried one SOG Raider platoon, shown boarding for the 60-mile flight into Laos.  
(Courtesy Eugene McCarley)

At Kontum, South Vietnam, Company B, Command & Control Central, 5th Special Forces Group, was alerted on 4 September 1970. Leading Operation Tailwind would be an older officer built like a stevedore but with a friendly small town demeanor, Captain Eugene McCarley. Called "personable" and "intelligent" by his men, McCarley was grounded in tactics, a confident former NCO with several Vietnam tours. McCarley's 120-man SOG Hatchet

Force company was organized similar to a U.S. infantry unit, except American Green Berets filled the NCO and officer positions with the foot soldiers either Chinese Nungs or, as in B Company's case, Montagnard tribesmen.

Since the target area laid 60 miles northwest of SOG's Dak To launch site, an impractical distance for Hueys to ferry so large a force, SOG looked for heavy CH-53 Sikorskys to insert the raider company in a single lift; the only CH-53 squadron in South Vietnam was HMH-463, a USMC Sea Stallion outfit in Danang. Though lacking cross-border experience, they'd have to do.

Escorted by 12 USMC twin-engined Cobra gunships, on 11 September the big Marine Sikorskys picked up Company B's 16 Americans and 110 Montagnards, refueled at Dak To, and took off. Operation Tailwind was underway.



SOG's Company B "Hatchet Force" boards USMC helos at Dak To, South Vietnam, to raid deep into Laos. (Courtesy Eugene McCarley)

The helicopter armada paralleled the remote border for 50 miles then turned west into the high mountains of Laos and almost immediately NVA gunners began tracking them, spraying the air with heavy machineguns. Inside the semi-trailer size cargo compartments, bullets cracked through the floors amid the din of whining turbines, hit after hit after hit, sounding like someone shooting a tin can with a BB gun, but the huge choppers just kept lumbering between the jungled hills and limestone bluffs.



Aboard one USMC helicopter, the SOG command element "camos up," with commanders, Capt. Eugene McCarley (right), and Medic Gary Michael Rose (center). (Courtesy Eugene McCarley)

Inside one bird, blood sprayed on the ceiling and a Yard collapsed, badly wounded; everyone backed away while a medic treated him, then another round penetrated and another man randomly fell, then another. Then the choppers slowed and began a wide orbit while Marine Cobras fired white phosphorous rockets to mask them from anti-aircraft guns. The Sea Stallions circled down, then the shooting almost stopped and the ramp doors dropped disclosing a bright sun and lush green countryside. Beneath a sky alive with

fighters and gunships, the Hatchet Force men trotted to a woodline as the Sea Stallions lifted away. For the next three days, each day, all day, Cobras or A-1s or AC-130 Spectres would be overhead.

Captain McCarley wasted not a minute and immediately began aggressively advancing northwest because, he knew, any hesitation would allow the NVA to fix them, shell them and overrun them. So long as he kept them moving, McCarley kept the initiative.

As quickly as they left the Landing Zone they heard telephones ringing; maneuvering toward the sound, the Hatchet Force men hit an NVA squad that fired a few rounds and fled. Then the point squad reported bunkers; they were just a quarter-mile from their LZ.

McCarley swung two platoons into a defensive perimeter while several squads swept through to see what they'd found. "It was amazing," said Specialist Five Craig Schmidt. A 500-yard-long line of earthen bunkers were crammed with six-foot-long 122mm and 140mm rockets, thousands of them, intended for bombarding Danang and Chu Lai, 100 miles to the east.

But that would not happen now. Hurriedly, Schmidt and Sergeant First Class Jim Breville laid a demolition charge in each of the 20 bunkers, linking them all together with det cord, and dual-priming with time-delay detonators. As the company headed out they lit the 30-minute fuzes.

Company B had marched 1000 yards west when an explosion shook the ground followed by 30 secondaries, the prettiest music a Special Forces demo man can hear; rockets would continue to cook off for 12 hours with the resounding echoes announcing a challenge: Come on down, try to stop us unless you come soon, we'll destroy everything within ten miles.

One NVA platoon took the challenge. McCarley shot it out with them for an hour then backed off, called several sets of fighters on them, then swung around and continued heading west.

The fight left several Montagnards seriously wounded so the Hatchet Force secured an LZ for medevac. Before a chopper could get there 150 NVA massed and assaulted; the Hatchet Force fought them off, pounded them with air and, carrying their wounded along, began marching west again.

By now it was almost dark, time to set up a perimeter for the night -- at least that's what the NVA expected. Determined not to stop long enough for the enemy to mass superior forces against them, McCarley kept Company B moving.

All night the Hatchet Force bumped into NVA squads and each time either a salvo from AC-130 gunships or a quick assault forced them aside. Nothing would stop the Hatchet Force; if they encountered NVA in strength, McCarley called air and swung right or left but kept moving. That whole night they marched west, deeper into Laos and the farther they marched the bigger a threat they posed and the better they performed their diversionary role.

By dawn nine of the 16 Americans and even more Montagnards had been wounded. The Hatchet Force medic, Sergeant Gary Michael Rose, patched them up and kept them going.

Not long after sunrise they hit a small delay position with five NVA, then another 40 NVA hit their left flank supported by mortars and rocket launchers. Company B fought through the delay position and called air strikes on the others.

By midday the company was walking a ridge a half-mile above Highway 165 when the jungle thinned and they could see the road and hundreds of NVA in a long column and a dozen trucks paralleling them. McCarley called in A-1 Skyraiders, destroying the trucks and scattering the infantry. "From the amount of men I saw on that road," Craig Schmidt thought, "if they ever really knew where we were at, they could take us out."

To keep the enemy guessing, the tactically adroit McCarley kept off roads and main trails, hurrying instead along streambeds, small paths or thinly vegetated ridges. And each time the NVA blocked the Hatchet Force, he pounded them with Skyraiders or Cobras or Phantoms and bypassed them.

With over two dozen wounded, some serious, movement was becoming impeded. To medevac the worst cases, a CH-53 arrived with two medics aboard, Staff Sergeant John Padgett and Sergeant John Browne. Heavy NVA fire greeted the big Sikorsky, slapping slugs through its thin aluminum skin.

Laying on the CH-53's lowered ramp, Browne held Padgett by the belt while he reached for the wounded Yards the Hatchet Force medic, Gary Michael Rose, offered up. Before the first casualty was aboard enemy fire surged and the pilot had to climb away, banked right, and an RPG hit the Sikorsky amid ship. Padgett is convinced God rode with that CH-53, for the anti-tank rocket punched through the bird's belly, flew through the cabin and through a gas tank, spewing high octane fuel on everyone, but it didn't detonate. The chopper limped about five miles and sat down hard in the middle of an empty bunker area; 20 minutes later another CH-53 came in, and while the crews and medics climbed ladders enemy .51 caliber machineguns opened fire. They managed to fly away but five minutes later made a forced landing, the second CH-53 lost that day. Another helicopter rescued them.

The young Hatchet Force medic, Gary Rose, was now heavily pressed, hustling to keep men alive, helping carry the worst cases himself; several times he charged through fire to treat fallen Montagnards or Americans. "Many times he had three or four or five wounded at once," Craig Schmidt said.

Their second night they had to get some rest. Capt. McCarley had them dig in on a knoll overlooking the road, the highest ground he could find. NVA probes began just after dusk, mostly RPGs lobbed from the darkness, answered by claymores and Spectre gunship fire. Few men slept.

One RPG rocket burst near Craig Schmidt, the demo man, and Gary Rose, the medic, spraying both with shrapnel; two nearby Montagnards were severely wounded. Ignoring his own injuries and the continuing fire, Rose crawled over and treated them; when



others slept, Rose worked, when others ate, Rose worked. He never complained, just saved lives. "He was doing whatever it took to do the job," Schmidt said.



One hooch in the NVA "Binh Tram," overrun by the SOG force shortly before extraction. (Courtesy Eugene McCarley)

Surely the NVA would attack in strength at dawn; therefore Capt. McCarley had them up and underway an hour before daylight. It was long and arduous, but Day Three went like Day Two, with the advancing SOG company parrying enemy blows, destroying stockpiles whenever encountered, and continuing to march westward.

By the next morning, most Hatchet Force men were so tired they wanted to die; they'd fought their way through thick jungle, 15 miles cross-country since landing, an extraordinary pace. That fourth morning they'd marched west another three hours when the point took fire from a few NVA who fled into a bunker area. McCarley felt it was his to seize so he ordered an attack; after softening the NVA positions with air strikes and smallarms fire the Hatchet Force men advanced. Craig Schmidt and another squad leader, Sergeant Manuel Orozco, got their troops on line, and assaulted. The enemy fell back, abandoning a battalion-size basecamp but for two bunkers held by cutoff NVA. While fire kept the NVA's heads down two Yards crept forward and rolled grenades inside.

The basecamp was seized but by now the friendly wounded had risen to 49 -- nearly 50 per cent casualties - - and the sole overworked medic, Doc Rose, himself wounded twice, could barely keep up with the work.

While Rose performed miracles, the rest of the Hatchet Force searched the basecamp's many hootches and bunkers. Fifty-four NVA bodies were discovered but none yielded significant intelligence. Along with four trucks, they found a 120mm mortar and nine tons of rice.



Operation Tailwind medic, Sgt. Gary Rose (center), single-handedly treated 60 wounded men, was himself wounded three times. His Distinguished Service Cross is now being reconsidered for the Medal of Honor. (Courtesy Ted Wicorek)

Then one search party called Capt. McCarley to a large bunker 12 feet below ground; inside were maps covering the walls and hundreds of pounds of documents stored in footlockers and pouches. Clearly this was more than a battalion basecamp it was a major logistical command center, probably the headquarters that controlled nearby Highway 165. Pack up all the documents, McCarley ordered, they would carry them out. Less than 30 minutes after seizing the camp, Company B was moving west again; behind them demolitions charges went off, destroying the four trucks.

After leaving the camp the NVA stalked them at every turn and by now, four days into the mission, FACs overhead could see enemy units converging on Company B from two directions. By now every American had been wounded and several men, like Schmidt and Rose, had multiple wounds. It was time to get out. To expedite movement McCarley

abandoned the jungle for a smooth road and poured on the speed. An NVA squad attempted to delay them but a quick airstrike and aggressive assault ended that. Then came word that the Marine CH-53s had launched and would be there in 30 minutes.

Despite his fatigue, McCarley fought smart and refused to use the first LZ they came upon, where enemy gunners on high ground too easily could fire down on the huge Sikorskys. Just before the choppers arrived, Company B encircled another LZ while a SOG man riding with the FAC, William "Country" Grimes, brought in A-1s led by USAF Major Art Bishop with CBU-30 tear gas bomblets to blind anti-aircraft gunners.



USAF 1st LT. Tom Stump, A-1 Pilot who was awarded Distinguished Flying Cross for his spectacular flying which allowed extraction of outnumbered SOG forces.  
(Courtesy Tom Stump)

Then one CH-53 landed and lifted away with the most badly wounded and the captured documents. NVA mortars began pounding the LZ, answered by F-4 Phantoms that pickled a dozen napalm canisters in a single pass. USAF First Lieutenant Tom Stump, who would receive a Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions, maneuvered his A-1 beneath low clouds and between jungled buttes to dump cluster bombs and napalm across swarms of closing enemy soldiers.

Rather than get bogged down defending the threatened LZ, McCarley led his two remaining platoons to another LZ where Cobra and Skyraider fire and a sudden landing generated only moderate groundfire. A second platoon climbed into a CH-53 for a clean getaway. NVA by the hundreds were now streaming out of the hills and let loose a nearly constant barrage.

Down to his last platoon, McCarley boldly repeated his tactic of abandoning one LZ to go to a new one. The Cobras and A-1s hit ahead and behind the last 40 Hatchet Force men as they ran, pounding the NVA with rockets, canons, tear gas and cluster bombs.

By the time McCarley reached a field of elephant grass large enough to accommodate a CH-53 he learned the helicopter's station time had almost expired; get out fast, he was told, or start evading. With NVA close behind, the SOG men trotted into the six-foot-high grass just as that welcome bird came in for them.

Capt. McCarley was the last man to climb aboard.

The extraction had been extraordinary, requiring strikes from 72 U.S. fighters, nearly a half- million pounds of bombs, rockets and napalm. "If it wasn't for the air cover," one Company B veteran said, "there's no way we would have got out of there." The SOG men had nothing but praise for the A-1 aviators and Marine pilots who flew repeatedly through heavy fire but never flinched. "Cool, real cool," was how one SOG man described them.

Company B had suffered three Montagnards killed and 33 wounded, along with all 16 Americans wounded. In three days of heavy fighting they had killed 144 NVA, wounded another 50, with an estimated 288 enemy killed by air.



Tailwind Commander Capt. Eugene McCarley (left), shows strain -- and pride -- of 4 days intense fighting. (Courtesy Ted Wicorek)

CIA leaders were "most appreciative" that SOG's diversion, indeed, had saved their threatened Hmong force, which recaptured the lost strongpoint. But that sentiment went unshared by senior MACV officers who complained that three multi-million-dollar CH-53s had been lost.



Booty - Craig Schmidt (center), displays prize from NVA basecamp, a portrait of North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh. (Courtesy Eugene McCarley)

Then the captured documents were examined by the MACV J-2 who found not nuggets but the mother lode: 400 pages contained what the U.S. command's most senior intelligence officer called, "the most significant collateral intelligence on the [Ho Chi Minh Trail] since the beginning of the war." Major General Potts, the MACV J-2, "was beside himself," SOG Lieutenant Colonel Galen Radke said. Chief SOG, Col. Sadler, reported, "Potts and Abrams told me they didn't appreciate the full implications of [the Trail system] until all those documents came back."

Two weeks later, the Marine CH-53 and Cobra aircrews flew to Kontum to celebrate with Company B. They didn't have to buy a drink all night. "I can't say enough about those guys," said Craig Schmidt. "They were great."

Capt. McCarley was recommended for the Distinguished Service Cross, while that heroic medic, Gary Michael Rose, who alone treated 50 wounded men and was himself wounded three times, was submitted for the Medal of Honor. Unfortunately, both decorations were downgraded.

And perhaps this is the single positive result from the CNN/Time "Tailwind" fiasco. When Secretary of Defense William Cohen personally met McCarley and Rose, and learned of their great courage and the bureaucracy that denied them these medals 28 years ago he ordered a re-evaluation. So, perhaps, a quarter of a century late, these

SOG warriors finally will receive the recognition that national security had made impossible in 1970.

***A Roster of Heroes: The Green Berets of Operation Tailwind***

*Captain Eugene C. McCarley  
First Sergeant Morris Adair  
Sergeant Gary Michael Rose  
1st Lieutenant Pete Landon  
1st Lieutenant Robert Van Buskirk  
Sergeant First Class Bernard Bright  
Sergeant First Class Jim Brevelle  
Staff Sergeant Donald Boudreau  
Sergeant Michael Hagen  
Specialist Five Jim Lucas  
Sergeant First Class Denver Minton  
Sergeant Manuel Orozco  
Staff Sergeant Keith Plancich  
Staff Sergeant William Scherer  
Specialist Five Craig Schmidt  
Sergeant Dave Young*

*This article is derived from Major Plaster's award-winning book, SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam. The accompanying photos appear with hundreds of other never-before-seen SOG pictures in Maj. Plaster's new book, SOG: A Pictorial History, which is available to purchase on this Website.*