

HUEY helicopters swoop down from treetop level, swirling loose brush and dirt in all directions. One flares and settles near the wind-swept ground. The jungle lurks 20 meters away. Inside the ship, taut, camouflaged faces appear. Thumbs rest along M16 selectors; fingers caress triggers. Eyes search the jungle wall as muscles tense in anticipation.

"Go," shouts the team leader. Six tiger-suited men leap from the skirts of the hovering Huey, beginning a race to the wood line. When the last man is clear, the watching pilot pulls pitch and the Huey reels toward the sky while the doorgunner trains his M60 on the dwindling jungle.

This typical class-day exercise of the MACV (Military Assistance Command-Vietnam) Recondo School illustrates the training methods which created combat soldiers during the Vietnam-War era. The school combined the reality of combat with training to adapt to different tactical situations. At the Recondo School, the final exam, a real five-day combat operation, could mean life or death.

The school was the result of a young soldier's experiences on the Nazi-occupied Normandy coast during the waning summer months of 1944. Impressed by efforts of the 101st Airborne Division and the 1st Special Service Force, by 1958 that young soldier, William C. Westmoreland, would establish the first formal Army school strictly engaged in training for long-range reconnaissance and commando tactics.

As early as 1955, feasibility studies (called Operation Sagebrush) were performed at Ft. Bragg, N.C., to test troop insertion by helicopter. Rickety H-34 helicopters moved a few small patrols from the newly-formed SKY-CAV unit no farther than 50 miles. Patrols were inserted and extracted from battlefield areas unsuited to airborne operations. This pioneer airmobile test showed the worth of "Extend Ground Reconnaissance." The Army, however, did not yet recognize its need for airmobile operations.

Westmoreland, who believed strongly in the importance of unconventional small-unit tactics to perform special operations in a conventional war, enlisted the support of MAJ Lewis L. Millet, a Korean War Medal of Honor recipient, and the two men helped establish the Army's first formal recondo school. This two-week training course, held at Ft. Campbell, Ky., home of the 101st Airborne Division, gave the 101st trooper reconnaissance and patrolling experience. Graduates were authorized to wear a broad, black and white, downward-pointing arrowhead V symbolizing woodland, or the trooper's ability to move against the enemy by air-drop transport, day or night. Graduates became known by the nickname "Recondo."

Although unconventional warfare was a way of life in Southeast Asia, initially in the Vietnam War line-unit recon troops were often sacrificed to the body-count syndrome when division commanders sent them into enemy sectors to engage infiltrators, turning



MACV RECONDO SCHOOL

The Final Exam Could Be a Fire Fight!

by Earl Bleacher
Photos courtesy of Earl Bleacher

what should have been intelligence-gathering reconnaissance missions into ambush and heavy-combat patrols. In addition, most line units, unlike the Special Forces, had no specialized recon training. As a result, LRRPs (Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols) had become ineffective.

The Special Forces soldier was the true reconnaissance and intelligence specialist in Vietnam. Special Forces grew like a tree hidden by jungle canopy; its roots spread throughout South Vietnam. Attached to the main trunk were the project detachments. They were initiated to train CIDGs (Civilian Irregular Defense Groups) in LRRP techniques. Their missions encompassed location of enemy units, air strike coordination and harassing and deception. Project Delta (Det. B-52) grew first, and then Projects Omega (Det. B-50) and Sigma (Det. B-56). These projects demanded soldiers trained in all aspects of long-range strategic reconnaissance, and Special Forces had organic specialized training geared to teach these tactics.

In September 1966, Project Delta developed a comprehensive training POI (Program of Instruction) in strategic recon for all incoming personnel at its Nha Trang base 20 miles north of Cam Ranh Bay on the South China Sea. Replacements were assigned to a recon team on stand-down. The training cycle familiarized them with techniques of patrolling, insertion and extraction, and intelligence gathering. They also got to know other team members. It also trained each team as an integral unit,

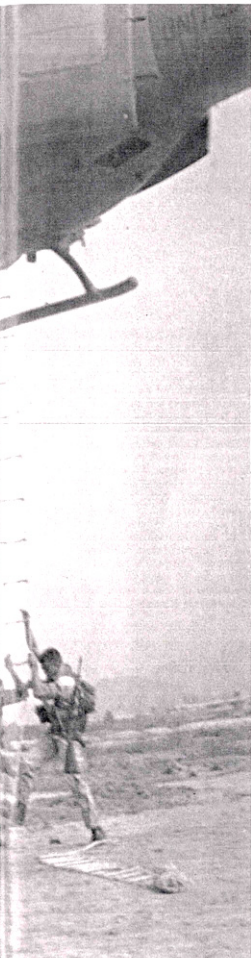
newcomers and veterans alike. In its final stages, the school staff determined which men should be eliminated from the team. Since cohesiveness was all-important, each man's strengths and weaknesses had to be discovered before committing the team to the field. Retraining cycles could occur as often as five times a month.

The MACV staff, who were already delving into the training dilemma, took note of the Delta program. GEN Westmoreland, now commander of MACV, recognized the need for a separate, unique, rigorous training dealing specifically with intelligence like those programs provided throughout Vietnam by Special Forces projects. Staff studies of training techniques led to the formation of a wartime school to train selected U.S. and Free World/Military Assistance Forces personnel in specialized reconnaissance techniques and skills.

A 150-by-200-meter Recondo compound was built next to Project Delta's training area. Although the two compounds shared a gate and their outer fences were part of the Nha Trang installation defense command perimeter, each remained a separate entity, involved in its own mission. The Recondo compound was spartan: rows of one-story cinder-block billets and offices that included an aid station, TOC (Tactical Operations Center) and supply buildings, all roofed with corrugated tin and with open window spaces covered by wooden shutters. To the east, outside the walls and fences, a rice paddy was made into a makeshift LZ.

Defensive walls, machine-gun parapets, barbed wire and mine fields lined the camp perimeter. An 81mm mortar pit was centrally positioned near the main classroom. Both

It's not as easy as it looks. ARVN trainees climb and descend rope ladders mounted on UH-1D to prepare for combat operations.





ABOVE: Extraction exercise gives recondo trainees practice at rescuing wounded from rugged terrain. BELOW: Extraction made easy. STABO rig assures greater safety for rider when plucked from the jungle. Photo: 5th Special Forces



a railroad-style timber water-tower and a 45-foot rappelling platform sported the school insignia, a variation of Westmoreland's first Recondo patch: The broad-faced arrow held a white V with the word "Recondo" emblazoned above.

The school used the existing staff of 5th Special Forces Group. Instructors were recruited from seasoned Group veterans. They had to be E-7s or above, have at least one prior Vietnam tour and a prior assignment to a Special Operations Project dealing mainly in reconnaissance. The 5th Group deputy commander of Special Operations was responsible for cadre selection, its HQ personnel carried out the school's finance and administration and its Logistical Center provided supplies and equipment. Since the 281st Assault Helicopter Company already provided Project Delta with two platoons of Slicks (UH-1s) and one platoon of gunships, a third platoon, known as the "Rat Pack," was added to support the Recondo School.

The school was established to serve all of MACV, and operational control came under the command of COL Francis J. Kelly, 5th Group commander. MAJ Art "Bo" Baker, past commander of the 2nd Battalion, 5th Infantry Rangers and assistant S-3 of Project Delta, became first the first Recondo School commandant.

Formal school operations began on 15 September 1966 with the arrival of the first class of 42 students. All were hand-picked volunteers of a combat arms MOS. Recondo candidates needed excellent physical condition, one month in-country and at least six more months to serve in Vietnam in a LRRP unit. Average student age was 20, and 75 percent of them had combat-patrol experience. Prospective Recondo students were chosen by parent unit, but because of operational objectives and critically high standards, the Recondo School staff made final choice.

The school had 48 enlisted men and six officers on its authorized cadre roster. Australian warrant officers assisted the ATTV (Australian Training Team in Vietnam) and SAS in Recondo training, and occasionally led American teams on patrol. South Korean students were in best physical condition. ROK officers and NCOs of the Korean counterparts of Special Forces were well-versed in long-range recon and accompanied their men on field exercises and missions.

Student roster was 120 men, a new cycle of 60 starting every two weeks. The three-week training period was grueling, and each class' elimination rate exceeded 30 percent. Only students who were mentally and physically prepared could make it.

The first Recondo class of 42 students came from many units, including the 9th, 25th, and 4th Infantry Divisions, the 101st Airborne Division, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the 1st Air Cavalry, the 3rd Squadron SAS Regiment of the Australian Army, and, of course, Special Forces.

On arrival, a standard Airborne PT Test

determined each man's condition. The Go's were separated from the No-Go's. Remaining men were separated into teams, each with one instructor in command. Men from the same or related units were kept together.

A typical class member arrived at Nha Trang with his weapon and LBE (Load Bearing Equipment). Specialized equipment was issued from school supply: linen, STABO harness, signal mirror, strobe, tiger-stripe, boonie cap, smoke grenades, pen flare, VS-17 ground signal panel and the URC-10 emergency handheld radio.

He stepped out of supply into midmorning glare, carrying a 30-pound ruck (as he would do for the rest of his training). He was then led off on a tranquil, hour-long, seven-mile constitutional through the hills. At the rappelling tower a jovial instructor shoved rope into his hands. He ascended the 30 feet twice — once with his ruck and once without. He might have to climb a rope into a hovering chopper. In addition, Army Conditioning Drill #1, Exercise #1 — the pushup — was generously applied.

First week curriculum consisted of academic subjects: map reading, aerial photo analysis, emergency medical aid, PRC-25 familiarization, and principles of intelligence.

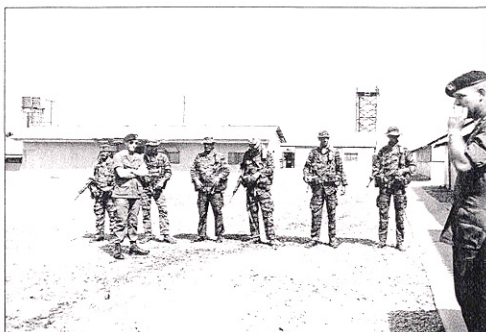
Proficient with weapons on arrival, students learned only nomenclature and specs of NVA/VC weapons, immediate action drills and sabotage.

The length of classes varied, depending on students. Classes were lengthened or shortened to fit aptitudes and difficulties. Originally map-reading tests were given on the first day, but the failure rate was so high 15 hours of class map work were added before examination.

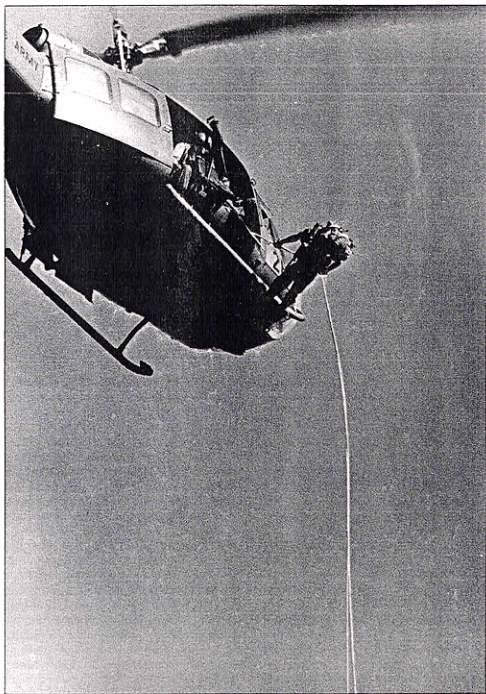
Medical instruction, including use of the albumin blood expander unit and intramuscular/intravenous injections, lasted six hours.

Patrolling occupied 23 hours of instruction. Students were already confident of their patrolling skill, since they'd been chosen to attend Recondo school and had been on patrols since their arrival in-country. But their idea of reconnaissance completely missed the mark, since intelligence gathering on a heavy combat patrol was strictly by chance.

Also, students had to learn the difference between LRRP and strategic recon. LRRP teams operated in a limited area forward of the FEBA (Forward Edge of the Battle Area), a distance usually equivalent to the largest piece of artillery in direct support. (In Vietnam this could mean anything from a 105mm howitzer to offshore eight-inchers.) In contrast, the SF soldier excelled in strategic recon. He ranged the entire countryside, without support gunnery. SF support came by air. A flight of Navy A-4s from a carrier, unable to complete a mission and cruising aimlessly about, or Army AH-1 Cobras on search-and-destroy might be assigned to assist strategic recon. With air support they roamed South Vietnam, supplying intelligence to the highest level of



ABOVE: Recondo demo team await arrival of LTG Freund and party. BELOW: The easiest way to get into action is to jump. Recon trainee rappels from UH-1D.



command for dissemination down the chain. Company-sized recon units such as Project Omega and the Mike Force provided a constant flow of intelligence. MACV's Recondo School wanted these veterans of the Special Operations units as teachers because of their wealth of accumulated knowledge about sound, secure patrolling.

Methods of heliborne infiltration/exfiltration were important to the Recondo. Project Delta had already devised fundamental rigs from rope and webbing to extract men from the jungle. One of these was the McGuire Rig made of two rope slings connected together to hoist recon teams from dense jungle with no LZ. A large loop was slung for a seat and a smaller one attached farther up for a handhold. The McGuire Rig was useless for badly wounded or unconscious men.

In 1968 MAJ Robert L. Stevens, then commandant Recondo School, CPT John D. H. Knabb, his deputy, and SFC Clifford L. Roberts constructed a web harness that closely resembled a parachute's: the STABO harness (the acronym comes from the names of its inventors). D-rings were attached to the crest of the shoulder straps. Carabiners from ropes of hovering Hueys could be connected to the rings. The STABO enabled hook-up and extraction while delivering suppressive fire in a 360-degree radius. Team casualties, conscious or unconscious, could also be lifted out. The STABO became the Recondo's primary egress system and became part of the student's equipment-issue.

As the days passed, students learned the recon trade, developing confidence to face the final patrol. PT at 0430 was followed by progressively lengthened ruck marches.

Water training, on the Nha Trang coastline by Beach Road, began with capsized-boat drills and infiltration by small craft. After grueling hours, students collapsed on the beach to dry in the warm sun.

Then a deuce-and-a-half pulled off the road. The tailgate dropped, revealing a bedload of cold beer. The ensuing melee of parched men put aside "recondolization" for their brew, but they knew that next week's training would be on the island waiting ten miles across the water.

Hon Tre Island is less than a mile long with a 40-meter "mountain" on its northeast side. Narrow beaches are strewn with jagged rock and sand. Where no beach exists, small cliffs rise out of the sea. Rock stretches just under the surface for a short distance before dropping deep into the sea. Covered by rolling green, broken by clusters of trees and brush, its only inhabitants are small herds of goats and cattle.

It was here that the fledgling Recondo first applied the information he'd heard from the platform.

At Hon Tre the cadre could see their people in action and show them the combative law of physics: "For every action there must be an immediate and ferocious reaction, or an expedient line of departure." Students learned the Dos and Don'ts of pa-



trolling. They learned to use hand signals, select rendezvous sites and identify booby traps. They had to navigate a jungle lane where silhouette targets popped up from surrounding brush and dispatch them by the "Quick Fire" method. They zeroed their weapons at a compact firing range on the island. Other ranges acquainted them with the M14 and M16 series antipersonnel mines and the M18 Claymore mine.

Patrolling was still the primary lesson. Students absorbed lessons on cover and concealment, noise and light security, personal and weapon camouflage, sound and smell recognition, and establishing OPs and LPs. They continuously reviewed the three Ds of counterintelligence: Deny, detect and deceive. The less the enemy knew about you, the easier he was to defeat. When he left Hon Tre, the Recondo could "snoop and poop" with the best.

When Recondo students returned to the

Recondo students climb into rubber raft for an exercise in amphibious operations.

compound, they had a brief rest before the big week, the final test. Appropriately nicknamed "You Bet Your Life," this five-day reconnaissance mission separated MACV Recondo School from all others. To graduate the Recondo School student had to stand up against the real thing.

The Nha Trang area support command, 5th Special Forces Operational Base (SFOB), Nha Trang Air Base and the city itself formed a quadrangle which came under fire from the surrounding mountains. Recondo School's training missions provided intelligence for the defense of Nha Trang.

A warning order issued to each six-to-14-man team was followed by an operation



order. Students picked up equipment and checked it. Students, with guidance from instructors, planned and coordinated the tentative mission, rotating assignments so each played every part in the process. A student/cadre chain of command was established. The Launch Officer (LO) assumed overall responsibility for the operation from receipt of the warning order to the closing statement of the after-action report. During a recon flight over the area of operation, students and instructors selected primary and alternate infil/exfil sites.

At Hour Nine (H-9), troop helicopters of the 281st Assault Helicopter Company were rigged by the operations sergeant, and the LO informed TOC of the team composition. Three Hueys transported the teams while three UH-1B gunships provided support. Often, Air Force O-1E Bird Dog planes were requested as a FAC (Forward Air Control) for on-call air strikes.

At H-8, teams were moved to the launch sites and given final instructions.

At H-1, the team leader shouted, "Load up."

Huey transports departed southwest from Nha Trang to rendezvous and identify on a preselected frequency at altitude with support aircraft and the Command and Control ship, which carried the school commandant and S-3.

Students' sweat dried into a paste of body salt and camouflage stick in the cold blast of air through the Huey doors. The pilot and co-pilot placidly tuned radios and glanced at instrument dials. The doorunner leaned against his M60. A belt of 7.62 ran down into the ammo box. The last vestiges of sunlight gleamed from beyond the hills.

Ahead, a small blotch of brown appeared in the jungle canopy 500 feet below. A radial patchwork of toppled elephant grass spread toward the tree line. Abruptly, they

were upon it, and without changing speed, they zoomed over and past, the instructor intently studying the area. He leaned back into the cabin and adjusted his headset, lips moving.

The C and C ship transmitted: "Mission is a 'GO.'" and the Hueys rolled into a diamond formation, the first team bird moving to the tail slot. The dark choppers made their final run slowly, again approaching the LZ. The blades turned, deflecting more air, and the characteristic thumping deepened. The lead ship intentionally overshot the clearing, the second and third doggedly pursuing, and when the last ship followed suit, the floor dropped out from under the first team. The doorunner directed his M60 toward the surrounding wall of tangled vines and trees. The bird skimmed the LZ with everyone coiled to eject.

The team leader shouted, "GO," and the Huey's sides vomited green bodies, which hit the ground at a run. The team bird joined the lagging formation. The illusion was complete: a routine overflight. On the ground, the team moved in the direction of the departing birds, 100 yards into the woodline. The student team leader immediately took head count in the absolute silence. He listened for rustling foliage, metallic clicks or other minute sounds that could indicate the presence of enemy soldiers.

The instructor was confident of the landing-zone security. The team had to find a RON (remain overnight) site before dark, but first it made its first transmission on the PRC-25, notifying the school that all was well and the team was proceeding with the mission.

The team selected a good site with a point of limited visibility, adequate cover and concealment. The team was arranged so that by lying head to head, half could sleep while half remained awake. They rotated every few hours. Except for radio work, a strict code of silence was enforced, the men using hand and arm signals to communicate.

Common fear was the most deadly adversary, as another team discovered. On their combat exercise, they went into their RON site and set up security. One nervous soldier fell asleep, cradling a WP (white phosphorus) grenade in his hand, the pin pulled. During the night, he either heard a warning noise or change of guard, and dropped the grenade, the handle flying off. Searing phosphorous exploded and ignited the jungle.

The team members suffered third-degree burns as they packed their comrade in mud, trying to extinguish his burning body. The acid-like gel ate the flesh from his frame. A school staff member was medevacked to a waiting field hospital and placed on life-support equipment to counteract phosphorous poisoning.

Fear can wreak havoc upon one man or an entire team. In Recondo weak links are unacceptable.

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The team leader carried Air Force meteorological data giving the exact times of first light and sunset. He roused the team an hour before first light and they removed all traces of their presence.

Moving on a preselected route and remaining clear of trails, the mission began in earnest, its goal to confirm intelligence of suspected cache placements and infiltration routes into the valley. Recondo is the first rung in a ladder of intel efforts leading from the field to MACV command. The team scoured their assigned jungle sector for traces of enemy troop movement. They knew how to deduce element size, direction and intent from footprints and refuse. The enemy, however, wasn't being generous. It was also important for them to realize that their sandaled rivals might be exercising the same steps in tracking them.

Support aircraft flew over the target area twice daily, flying a straight course to prevent suspicion. The RTO monitored his radio during these flights, listening for coded messages. At the predesignated exfil sites, 281st gunships cruised aloft not more than 10 minutes from the launch point. The birds relayed messages while inspecting the security of all LZs. For prolonged radio contact, the LO moved to another location, making a "dummy" contact with an imaginary team. The school maintained a 24-hour watch of the CW and FM radios and guard frequencies for emergency calls from the field. This system of fail-safe procedures ensured that support would always be available without revealing the team's position.

The school TOC (Tactical Operations Center) uncasily waited for alert calls, noting the team's position. The student RTO carried a PRC on his back and each instructor carried a handset, so he could take command and call the shots. Often the Recondos have to lie motionless, sweating the minutes into hours, meshing with the vines and bushes surrounding them, while the enemy stares directly into their faces, before turning back down the trail.

The nature of these graduation missions was innately dangerous, but surprisingly,

combat-related deaths were small in number. Only two were reported between November 1966 and April 1968.

Instructors and students weren't the only individuals facing peril. During the summer of 1968, Recondo teams did occasionally contact enemy patrols and incur casualties. Late in the year, one team inadvertently made contact with an enemy point man and opened fire, not knowing that a company-sized clement lurked a few meters down the trail.

The team called for assistance, and the 550th CIDG (the Vietnamese Civilian Irregular Defense Group) responded for the second time that year. Jungle fighting prevented direct confirmation of the actual numbers involved. The team was under heavy fire from a large force, size unknown.

Grenades exploding at the perimeter wounded several team members. The fire-fight was at its peak when the thumping sounds of approaching Hueys mingled with the staccato clattering of machine guns.

Off-loading at a nearby clearing, the Viet mercenary force began to work around to the team's right flank, popping off rounds into the dense brush. In a matter of minutes the 550th was positioned to cover the team's departure.

Making their way quickly to the LZ, the team broke out into the clearing as a medevac was arriving. Rushing the wounded onboard a Huey at a four-foot hover was difficult so the school medic stepped out on the skid, tethered to the cabin floor by a cargo harness. As he bent over to reach a wounded man, a 12.7mm round struck him in the chest. His dead body hung from the side door, streams of blood splattering in the ship's ground effect, the only fatality of the fire fight. Shortly after, another Recon team in the sector moved in and kept the VC detachment under surveillance.

The returning soldiers were no longer students, but qualified Recondos, who had earned the title in the ultimate test environment. In formation outside Dewey Hall in the center of the school compound, each man was awarded the Arrowhead patch, to be worn on the right breast pocket of his fatigues. He was given a Recondo number, entered into his records for the rest of his Army career: his license to instruct or perform LRRP missions in his home unit. The

honor graduate of the team was rewarded with a Gerber combat knife with "Recondo Honor Graduate" engraved on the blade. The first man to receive this honor was SGT Irving K. Herrman of D Troop, 4th Cavalry, 25th Infantry on 1 October 1966. Another first came on 11 May 1968, when SGT Harwell P. Quillan, Jr. became the first U.S. Air Force Recondo graduate.

The MACV Recondo School proved Westmoreland's vision. In 1968 the Combat Orientation Course was instituted to train 5th Special Forces personnel. Located on the Recondo compound, it acclimated newly-arrived 5th Group soldiers to the current situation in Southeast Asia by sharing much of the Recondo-student platform instruction. These Special Forces veterans were either on their first tour in-country or had been outside of the mainstream of SF activities for several years. Instead of a graduation patrol at the end of their course, they were dispatched to A-502, an SF camp 15 miles outside of Nha Trang to work with indigenous units in the field.

In December 1970, the MACV Recondo School closed down, ending four years of continual, intensive, lifesaving training. Shortly afterward, C Company of the 75th Rangers moved into the compound, using it as a base for LRRP operations. The school left its mark, however. Its legacy lives on in a majority of Army posts across the United States. Each year, in Army schools, new generations of fighting men learn Recondo's battle-tempered lessons: Survival is the gift of Recondo School. ✕