

Several challenges are posed to multi-lateral and NGO agencies, as well as recipient governments, if the relief enterprise is to be useful in the future: greater cooperation between donor and recipient is necessary to reduce the worst intrusive elements of the process; local and global strategies for confronting major crises are necessary to reduce the inadequate “emergency” nature of these short-term efforts; much greater coordination of donor agencies and institutions is needed to reduce competition. To effect these changes the authors call for a series of institutional reforms that will ensure: high-level political review of humanitarian emergencies; a code of conduct for greater professionalism by aid providers; greater emphasis on building local capacity; and clearer authority for UN agencies to deal with armed insurgencies in the midst of humanitarian efforts.

The extensive experience of the authors compels them to recount “the continuing imperfections of human society” that allow famines to occur in a world of plenty. Yet they remain basically optimistic: “Rising moral expectations that now influence international responses to such tragedies and the increasing globalization of humanitarian action mean that suffering which might have been ignored in the past can no longer be tolerated today.” Would that the current situations in Somalia and Bosnia could prove them right!

Ronald J.R. Mathies,
Conrad Grebel College,
University of Waterloo

Reske, Charles F. *MACVSOG Command History, Annexes A, N, & M (1964-1966)*. Sharon Center, OH: Alpha Publications, 1992.

Of the many unusual things spawned by the Vietnam War, none was as mysterious as the Special Operations Group (SOG) of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). Founded in 1964, SOG’s original function was to carry out clandestine, cross-border operations against what was then North Vietnam, as mandated by the so-called Operation Plan (OPLAN) 34A, a strategy handed down by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.¹ Officially known under the cover name “Studies and Observations Group,” SOG — or “MACVSOG,” as some insist — has received little attention, despite the growing intensity of Vietnam War studies as a whole. Early coverage by the *Washington Post* failed to inspire much interest elsewhere in the American press, and other sources tend to involve brief sections in such works as memoirs, semi-journalistic exposés, and unofficial histories of specific commando formations.²

Single-handedly rectifying the above situation is Charles F. Reske, whose background is of no small interest by itself. A holder of degrees in history and archaeology, Reske spent the Vietnam War years with the Naval Security Group,

a component of the US signals intelligence (SIGINT) apparatus. Intrigued by what little he learned about SOG, Reske lodged a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for the unit's own "command history." Had he known in advance the difficulty of his request, he may not have gone ahead with it: "Review and declassification of the documents in question took approximately five years."³

Of course, nothing as sensitive as SOG comes through the FOIA system intact, and the material delivered to Reske was sprinkled with deletions (although, happily, not quite as many as one might expect). In presenting the full texts of three annexes to the command history — covering SOG's first three years of existence — Reske has been forced to include numerous annotations. Some of the missing words and sentences are so obvious that one wonders why the censors even bothered. For instance, inconsistent excision in the passage covering the "DESOTO" naval patrol that stumbled into the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Incident has left "DESOTO" blanked out and "patrol" preserved at some points but the reverse at others. (pp. 45-46) Several deletions, however, are quite obscure, and Reske has fallen back upon the "Senator Gravel" edition of the celebrated Pentagon Papers in an attempt to reconstruct some of the missing items. (p. 13) Also, it should be understood that this is actually Reske's second book devoted to SOG, the previous one having covered Annex B and the period 1971-72. (As may be clear by now, the original, alphabetical order of the annexes had little to do with chronological order.) Annex B likewise provided insights as to the missing sections. (p. 13)

With all their undeniable drawbacks as a somewhat mutilated unit history, Annexes A, N and M are important for those piecing together the clandestine aspects of the struggle for Indochina. While dry and bureaucratic in tone, the annexes confirm the suspicion that there is nothing like secrecy to inflate the mystique of any organization. One reads of chronic mechanical problems among the vessels used for coastal raids, extortion by corrupt South Vietnamese air force personnel working with SOG, shortages of all sorts of crucial equipment, and a faulty screening process for local recruits that left SOG riddled with potential security threats. (pp. 49-50, 70, 77, 83-84, 86) Even by the start of 1965, SOG's American contingent amounted to just 146 military personnel and civilians. (p. 70) This is not the stuff of legends.

Determined to soldier on, whatever the difficulties, SOG showed boundless daring but fell into the same trap that swallowed the remainder of the US commitment to Southeast Asia. Every activity had to have an impressive number attached to it, whether or not the activity was of any real use. In 1966 alone, Annex M relates, SOG naval units used mortars to fire two million "psywar" leaflets at the Northern Vietnamese coast. (p. 106) Result: unknown. In the same year, those units also briefly abducted and "re-educated" over 350 North Vietnamese civilians. (p. 106) Again, there is no indication this accomplished anything.

Of particular interest to Vietnam War specialists is the part of Annex A (pp. 45-46) relating to the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, which raised the curtain on an escalated US involvement in the Vietnamese turmoil. Any suspicion that SOG

deliberately coordinated its maritime activities to provoke North Vietnamese assaults on US Navy destroyers will receive little encouragement here (although there is not much discouragement, either). Curiously, one finds no mention at all of the August 2 clash of the two-part 1964 incident, while the August 4 “clash” — the one many suspect existed only in the minds of jittery sailors⁴ — is cited only because of the two-month suspension of operations in the gulf ordered by the Joint Chiefs in its wake. It may be dangerous to accept all this at face value, but a preliminary impression is that SOG just was not terribly concerned about the destroyers, in a conspiratorial sense or otherwise. Annex A does indicate that SOG’s policy at the time of the incident was to hold back its naval raiders for 36 hours after the passage of a destroyer patrol, and that this was observed. The annex also points out that MACV intervened to keep the patrol well north of an area of SOG operations on the night of August 3-4. Adding to these complexities is the issue of SOG’s mediocre security precautions, mentioned earlier. If the unit really was compromised from the start by North Vietnamese infiltrators, there is a faint possibility that Hanoi understood whatever was transpiring but decided to go along with it for reasons of its own.

Adding to the usefulness of Reske’s book is the inclusion of the actual manual for the Norwegian-built “Nasty” class of fast patrol/torpedo boats (PTF) used by SOG, plus an essay on the US military’s method of document classification (which Reske, as a former cryptologist, is well qualified to write). In all, the 1964-66 instalment of *MACVSOG Command History* is a valuable addition to Vietnam War literature.

Scott Van Wynsberghe
Winnipeg

Endnotes

1. Shelby L. Stanton, *Green Berets at War: U.S. Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia, 1956-1976* (New York: Dell, 1987), p. 230; Kevin M. Generous, *Vietnam: the Secret War* (London: Bison, 1985), p. 109; Barry Lando, “The Secret War of SOG,” *Washington Post*, 12 August 1973.
2. Lando, “The Secret War of SOG”; Gen. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell 1980), pp. 135-38; Generous, *Vietnam: The Secret War*, pp. 109-15; Benjamin Schemmer, *The Raid*, rev. ed. (New York: Avon, 1986), pp. 47-51; Charles M. Simpson III, *Inside the Green Berets* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1983), pp. 135-41; Stanton, *Green Berets at War*, pp. 229-36; T.L. Bosiljevac, *SEALS: UDT/SEAL Operations in Vietnam* (New York: Ivy, 1991), pp. 23-30.
3. Charles F. Reske to Scott Van Wynsberghe, 16 August 1993.
4. Joseph C. Goulden, *Truth is the First Casualty: The Gulf of Tonkin Affair — Illusion and Reality* (New York: James B. Adler/Rand McNally, 1969), pp. 144-52; “The ‘Phantom Battle’ that Led to War,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 23 July 1984.