

405 Stephen Moore

Voiceover: This program is sponsored by the United States Naval Institute.

(Theme music)

Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.

(Applause)

Williams: Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents* with author Stephen Moore discussing his book *Uncommon Valor: The Recon Company That Earned Five Medals of Honor and Included America's Most Decorated Green Beret*. I'm your host Jay Williams, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. It's sponsored by the United States Naval Institute. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at [PritzkerMilitary.org](http://PritzkerMilitary.org). While media coverage of America's involvement in the Vietnam War centered around air raids, offenses, and other military actions, a war of another sort was being fought deep within the jungles and villages by an organization that went by the codename Studies and Observation Group or SOG. The SOG was the most covert US military unit of its time. It contained only volunteers from such elite units as the Army's Green Berets, Navy SEALs, and Air Force Air Commandos. SOG operatives worked in small teams going behind enemy lines in Laos and Cambodia and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They were tasked with performing special reconnaissance missions, sabotaging North Vietnamese Army ammunition, rescuing downed US pilots, and other black ops missions. One company, based out of Forward Operating Base 2, became one of the most highly decorated units of the Vietnam War, with five of its soldiers earning the Medal of Honor and eight awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, America's second highest military award for valor. Purple Hearts were awarded to SOG veterans at a pace unparalleled in America's wars of the 20th century. One of these soldiers, Bob Howard, was wounded on fourteen different occasions. He received eight Purple Hearts and was recommended for the Medal of Honor after three different missions. He emerged from Vietnam as the most highly decorated soldier since WWII's Audie Murphy. In his new book author Stephen Moore gives readers a look into the formation and operation of this advanced Special Forces recon company during one of the nation's most dangerous and polarizing conflicts. Stephen Moore is the author of eighteen books on WWII and Texas history including *As Good As Dead* and *Texas Rising*. He is a contributing writer for the Dallas Morning News. He graduated from Stephen F. Austin State University where he studied advertising, marketing, and journalism. Please join me in welcoming Stephen Moore to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.

(Applause)

Moore: Thank you and good evening. Only in the last twenty years has Vietnam's covert SOG group really gotten some attention, gotten some recognition. Officially the Military Assistance Command Vietnam or MACV, this included a special unit of covert people who went by the name Studies and Observations Group, or SOG for short. This unit was composed primarily of US Army Green Berets plus a few Navy SEALs and their Air Force Commando comrades. These men running these missions could simply opt out at any time and be reassigned, so it was strictly volunteer, but the SOG men took on the most dangerous assignments, working behind enemy lines to penetrate NVA facilities along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Their mission might often be to locate enemy forces, identify targets for air attacks, perform bomb damage assessments or BDAs, sabotage enemy ammunition, capture enemy soldiers for intelligence purposes, attempt to rescue

American POWs or downed pilots, or to perform wire taps on communication lines. The initial area of operations were in South Vietnam and then into Laos. Operations run into Laos behind enemy lines were codenamed Shining Brass operations. Shining Brass was later renamed as Prairie Fire missions. Now the initial insertions into Laos were done on foot; they had to walk into the opponents' territory there. But as restrictions were eased up a little bit, teams could be inserted as far as twelve miles by helicopter into Laos. It was not until June of 1967 that Washington approved SOG teams to begin running missions also into Cambodia where the NVA troops were moving pretty much unmolested along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The cross border operations going into Cambodia were codenamed Daniel Boone missions, and when this name was given up it was later changed to Salem House missions. Now, the SOG missions remained classified for many years after the war, and I became interested in this elite group mainly because of my wife's uncle Wilson Hunt. I knew he had done some Special Forces work and some covert missions, and I'd heard lots of stories for years since the early 80s playing golf or at the family reunions, but it wasn't until 1996 when John Plaster's groundbreaking book on SOG came out that I was really eye-opened there. I told Wilson, I like writing history and doing books, and one of these days we're gonna sit down and we're gonna do a books about some of your stories, but it was years later before I finally became fully immersed in that project. In writing this book that came to become called *Uncommon Valor*, I quickly learned that it was more than just a relative's stories of running recon and doing special forces missions, but there was a lot more to it than that. MACV-SOG was very complex, and the secret forward operating base that Wilson Hunt operated from was truly special. I learned that the early SOG teams were inserted into their target areas by South Vietnamese air force pilots flying older Sikorsky CH-34 Choctaw choppers, which were known as King Bees. Later as SOG operations increased, they were allowed to start using US Army helicopters, UH-1 Hueys, to start putting in some of the teams. The recon guys called this going across the fence, going into denied enemy territory where if they were killed or captured the US government would deny knowing of their operation or their existence of being there. Now, from 1965 into 1967 operations the small SOG recon teams were known as Spike Teams. This nomenclature was changed early in 1968 so that Spike teams became known as recon teams. Each team like the one you see here had a leading Green Beret. The man in charge was called the one-zero. That was his codename. Now, a one-zero possessed special fighting skills and sound judgment to keep his team alive when facing numerically superior enemy opponents. He'd proven himself in combat and worked his way up to that position. Each team usually had at least a couple of Green Berets. The second man on the team, the assistant team leader, was codenamed the one-one. And if they had a third Green Beret his codename was the one-two. Usually the junior guy on the team was the commo-man, the one who carried the radio. Now the average team size like the one you see here, this is a little bit larger, but they were normally six to eight men, so if you had two or three Green Berets the balance of the team was filled out by indigenous soldiers, usually either Chinese Nungs or local Vietnamese natives that were known as Montagnards. And they had various tribes and different groups of Montagnards there, but the Green Berets simply referred to them as Yards, kind of as their nickname. This photo here is recon team Maine, and that's my relative Wilson Hunt who was the one-zero of the team, and he's got a couple other Green Berets there and of course nine indigenous soldiers. Now Wilson Hunt operated as part of a recon company of a forward operating base number two, or simply FOB-2, which was located in the central highlands region of Vietnam, South Vietnam, near a town called Kon Tum. Now, the base was originally allotted seven officers, seventy US enlisted men, and 135 indigenous troops, but it would take a long time to actually build up to that number. They

began operations far below that with TDY or temporary duty men to get the base started in May of 1966. When the first group of fully permanent assigned Green Berets were assigned, those thirty three guys called themselves the Kon Tum 33. They helped improve the old structures that were there, build barracks, build team huts and other headquarters buildings. FOB-2 began operations in 1966 with only eight small recon teams, each one named after a US state, so you had names like Spike Team Colorado, Spike Team Hawaii, Spike Team Texas, and so on. Now, going into the field the recon teams went in sterile. They had no identifying markings or insignia that would give them away as being US Special Forces. Some wore green fatigues of Vietnamese manufacture so they looked kinda like NVA uniforms, others wore darker tiger striped camo patterns. Other teams dressed in black pajama-style, so the idea was to throw off the enemy. Just caught at a glimpse in the jungle they might pass as somebody else. The earlier teams going into the field from FOB-2 initially carried 30-caliber Carl Gustav M-45 submachine guns that they simply called the Swedish K, but by 1967 SOG teams were approved to use M-16 machine guns. They used those until they could get their hands on the more popular Colt CAR-15, which is basically a shortened version of the M-16 automatic rifle. Most veteran recon men would leave at least one or two rounds out of their magazine so it wouldn't be fully jam-packed so it wouldn't get debris or anything else in there to jam them up in the middle of a firefight. So they learned a lot of tricks of the trade in the field. One of the elite jobs the SOG men did was to try and pull prisoner snatch operations to actually bring back a live enemy opponent back from denied territory and flying him out for intelligence purposes. The leading team was Spike team Ohio led by one-zero Dick Meadows. His team was the most accomplished prisoner snatching team over there in Vietnam, and when he finally finished his service Meadows and his team had pulled thirteen POWs alive out from behind enemy lines. Now, hauling out an enemy soldier was not an easy task. In 1966 Operation Shining Brass recon teams captured fifteen total prisoners. By comparison in 1969, SOG operatives only pulled four living enemy POWs. Many efforts were made but very often it didn't end up the way it started out. They might have to kill the guy in the process of getting out of there, he might bleed out or die after he was wounded when they tried to take him, or in many cases they simply had to leave their prisoner behind to save their own lives because of the firefights. Now, my uncle in law Wilson Hunt was one of those that, he pulled off defeat in back to back missions in September of 1968, and this is a picture of one of their prisoners there. His recon team had gone across the fence into Cambodia along with the recon company commander Captain Ed Lesesne. They were doing another mission but they happened upon some enemy soldiers and felt like they could probably pull off a prisoner snatch here because of the conditions, so they ended up lying in wait for two days and two nights. Finally they got to where they said, "We've got to pull the mission today or else," and they sent out word that they were gonna do it. And so they start sneaking up on where the enemy soldiers were passing by occasionally. Lesesne and Hunt each take a Montagnard with them and prepare, but as they get up close they realize they've come up on the bivouac area of a very large NVA force. It's not at all what they expected. They kind of hand signal to converse and decide, if we try to back out of there we're probably gonna get attacked anyway, so let's go ahead and pull the heist and see if we can grab one, and so they proceed. Lesesne slips up with his Yard and get within range and uses his M-16 to fire a single shot into the leg of one of the NVA soldiers. And he goes down screaming and flailing, and they move in and rush to subdue him and get him out of there. While Hunt and the other Yards open up an assault over there on the remaining NVA, so it's a full-blown firefight at this time. So you've got a wounded man to bring out of there, but they manage to pull it off, and they brought in the choppers and got him out of there, flew him back for intelligence

purposes, and found out that they had actually grabbed an officer. And it was an enemy platoon that was guarding an ammunition dump. So what do they do? They decide you guys are going back with a hatchet force, a big force, you're gonna destroy the weapons in that ammunition dump, and Hunt and Lesesne, you guys are going as point since you've been there, and you're gonna run this thing. So back they go, two days later after pulling off almost an impossible feat. Well, as Hunt's kind of doing a recon of the vicinity he happens upon a large group of NVA soldiers and finds that they're lying in ambush waiting for him and actually trips the assault. He gets into a firefight, wounds one of the enemy officers and goes back, and Lesesne tells him, "Go back and get him, check on him." So he takes his number-two guy with him, Bill Jank, and they crawl back in there, find the NVA officer, wounded, his rifle discarded, lying there bleeding. Once again it turns into a prisoner snatch operation, they haul him out in the midst of the firefight and all this going down and get him on the choppers and get him back. And when they get him back to the intelligence boys they find out they've actually gotten what in essence is about a company commander of the NVA, the senior guy, and find out some good intelligence for that. So they did get rewards. Sometimes it was monetary. In this case they got a ten-day R-and-R leave to Taiwan. So pulling off a prisoner snatch came with its rewards, and that was a coveted mission. Other SOG missions were at larger scale. I mentioned the reaction battalion. The FOB-2 compound had the recon teams, but it also had what was called Hatchet Force. Now each Hatchet Force platoon had four to five Green Berets and thirty to forty-two indigenous troops. They were called in for search and destroy mission, which came to be called SLAM missions, standing for search, locate, annihilate, and monitor. One of the hottest ones was in November of '68, officially SOG's SLAM 7 mission. It went in in response to RT California, under Staff Sergeant Joe Walker. His men had been hit several times. They'd had casualties. They'd had to fly the casualties out, but they were ordered to keep on the ground and keep moving. And after the second time of being hit they put in a large force, a SLAM force, to go with them. And as they carried on they had several Green Berets and Montagnards wounded. And once the SLAM force came in they continued with Lieutenant Walker and Lieutenant Lee Swain as the main commander. And after the second attack when the SLAM unit came in they found Walker and some of his men wounded, but five of the guys had gotten separated. They went up to the hilltop where some bomb craters were and found them there. The NVA had swept through during the early morning and killed all of them. Shot them in the bomb craters where they were hiding out, killed all the Montagnards. But one of the Green Berets actually survived a gunshot that just pierced the side of his head, so they brought him out, and the mission was ordered to continue. So they stayed on the ground for another ten days. During that time they had five indigenous men killed and forty-five SLAM recon men wounded. But they handed out heavy casualties to the NVA. They brought in numerous air strikes, which destroyed enemy caches, and they took one prisoner. The ability to keep NVA forces so engaged bottled them up enough to ensure that future SLAM operations would continue. There's Joe Walker, the team leader with his CAR-15. Lieutenant Swain there, he was one of the key guys that stayed on the ground the entire time. He was badly wounded by an RPG. He ended up losing one of his legs. The other leg he showed me is just bone--no calf left, no muscle, just almost just like a skeleton left, but tough guy, great sense of humor. And that's what these guys were all about. Stayed in there, survive that. He went on to become a snow skier and earned his pilot's license with one leg, so pretty brave guy. And another officer on the mission, Lieutenant Tom Jaeger, became Kon Tum's seventh recon man to earn America's second highest commendation, the Distinguished Service Cross. Now Kon Tum would be known not only for the eight DSCs that were earned but a staggering number of Medal of Honors that were earned by FOB-2's Green Berets.

The first man to earn America's highest honor was First Lieutenant George Kenton Sisler, seen here. He arrived in Kon Tum in 1966 and began running missions with the base's Hatchet Force. Sisler is a pretty sharp guy, pretty aggressive, liked to get into fights, always wanted to be in the fights, and then during one of his aerial reconnaissance missions he spotted this hilltop, and he decided this would be a great place on this rocky ridge to set up a radio relay communication site. He had a little connection with General Singlaub, at that time Colonel Jack Singlaub. He was the head of MACV SOG, or to them known as Chief SOG. And so he went to Saigon and laid out his plan to Sisler. He agreed, and he said, "That looks like a good place. I think we can hold that." And so they approved the plan, and weeks later Singlaub even flew out and did a personal site inspection, which was highly unorthodox for a commander to go into a zone like that. But Sisler's rocky peak became known as the codename Eagles Nest, and it was given the call sign of Heavy Drop. This was later changed to the name Leghorn, and this communication relay site would remain in operation throughout the war manned by Special Forces men on the hilltop. Now, Sisler's eagerness to fight continued to impress his comrades, but it would ultimately lead to his demise. On the morning of February 5, 1967 Sergeant first class Leonard Tilley was sent with his Spike Team Iowa to go in and do a bomb damage assessment or BDA. Sisler volunteered to join up with Tilley's team, and they were inserted with a couple other Green Berets and a platoon of thirty-three indigenous folks. There's Tilley. Now, two days into the mission Tilley and Sisler's platoon was hit by an NVA platoon. Two of their Yards were badly wounded early in the fight, and Sisler was forced to put out a Prairie Fire emergency call. Now Chief SOG Jack Singlaub had already established protocol with all forces that if you had a prairie call this meant a team was in eminent danger of being overrun. Any aerial forces in the area were to be diverted to try to come in and save that team and do what they could. So Sisler begins calling in air strikes against the NVA opponents. And during that time he goes out while Tilley covers him and tries to bring in his wounded comrades in the midst of the gunfight. He brings back one of the Montagnards, hauls him back to safety, and sets up the perimeter as the NVA charge again. Sisler uses his machine gun to cut down three of the NVA and used a grenade to take out an enemy gun crew, but he was intent on retrieving the body of the other Montagnard who had since perished during the middle of the firefight. They always wanted to bring their men back. He was intent on going out, and he's still calling in air strikes and lobbing grenades and using his other hand to fire his machine gun at charging opponents. And as he's standing up calling in air strikes, one of the snipers shoots him through the head and drops him on the spot. So Tilley continues the fight with his remaining Green Berets and indigenous troops. And it goes on for a long period of time trying to get to a landing zone to get the bodies out and to get the men out that are still alive. And Tilley made sure that the body of Sisler was airlifted out as well so he could be given proper rites as well as getting all the wounded men out. The fighting was so intense that Captain Ed Lesesne would write up both Leonard Tilley and Ken Sisler for the Medal of Honor. In the end Tilley's award would be downgraded to a Disguised Service Cross, but Sisler would be the first SOG man to earn the Medal of Honor, posthumously. And it was far from the last to be awarded to a Kon Tum recon man. It was a little over a year later before the next such honor was earned by another FOB-2 Green Beret. Staff Sergeant Fred William Zabitosky. He hailed from Trenton, New Jersey, and he kind of had a colorful past. He'd been to reform school for vandalism and petty theft. He had a father that left home when he was fifteen. Left Zab, as he was known to his buddies, with his mother to help raise his younger siblings until he was old enough to join the army and try to provide a stable future for himself. So Fred Zabitosky's first tour of Vietnam duty was in 1964. And by the time he reached FOB-2's recon company in the fall of '67, he was already on his third

tour of duty in Vietnam. He was assigned to run recon team Maine, which he did and took out on a number of successful missions, most of them across the fence. Zab was a valiant warrior, and one of the things he was called upon to do more often than others was to go in and run what was called a bright light mission. This was either a rescue or recovery mission. In a lot of these cases, the recon men said this was like going up into a stirred-up hornets nest. The enemy knew you were coming, something had already happened to get them provoked, and it was often retrieving the body of a slain comrade. Oftentimes these bodies might be booby trapped, other times they were left laying out there exposed while soldiers took hiding and waited for the Green Berets that they knew were going to come back. So Zabitosky had several battles like this where he went in and successfully brought back the bodies of comrades. In one case in early 1968 an entire team had been overrun by the NVA. The ones they captured and disarmed, they kept them there, and they allowed one of the Americans to live while they sliced open and used flamethrowers on the others, tortured them and burned them to death while the other guy had to watch. And he was allowed to escape and be extracted to spread the word. And so Zabitosky's Bright Light team has to go back in and recover the bodies of these guys, going into what he knows is gonna be a stirred-up hot area. He did his job. The Green Berets in that case all earned the Bronze Star. He was not one to leave a man behind, and that was a trait that would nearly cost him his own life six weeks later. Zab had been scheduled to go on to another assignment, so his recon team Maine he was gonna turn over to his junior guy, a guy named Doug Glover, who was gonna take over the one-zero position. He'd been trained by Zab, and he was a good man, but he had a bad feeling about this next mission coming up. And he told Fred, he said, "Zab, I'm gonna get killed tomorrow. I can just feel it." And Zabitosky said, "No, no, it's fine. Don't worry, Doug. Tell you what, I'll go in with you, we'll run this last mission, I'll be your assistant team leader." Give him some support. So RT Maine is inserted on February 17th by choppers from the 57th assault helicopter company. They were fully expecting them this day, and it didn't take long for the team to get into some pretty hot action. There were two other teams out there, and before you know it there's multiple Prairie Fire emergencies called up for air support including the team of Glover and Zabitosky. Glover quickly realized he's in over his head, and he asks Zab, "Please take over, help run the team, get us out of this mess," which Zab agrees to do. So he lays out a line of claymore mines rigged with white phosphorus grenades and attaches them and sends the remainder of the team to set up a perimeter. And he waits until the charges are gonna be blown. He tells the air cover, "When you see white smoke, bomb that stuff. That's gonna be the enemy. So he waits until the first NVA charge, blows his phosphorous grenades, gets the white smoke going, and gets the air cover coming in. Then he carefully detonated his remaining mines as the NVA soldiers advanced. Zabitosky would burn through fifteen magazines of bullets in the next half hour. A-1 Skyraiders came in dropping ordinance to help beat back the enemy until the team could get safely to their perimeter and on to the extraction LZ. There they had to fight off attacks for another ninety minutes until choppers could finally come in to get to them. These are again the 57 assault helicopter guys coming in, and they come into the LZ to try to extract team Maine. The first Slick, codenames Gladiator 3, pulled out one Green Beret and three of the Chinese Nung soldiers. Five members of RT Maine were still left on the ground—Zabitosky, Glover, and three of their Nungs. The next chopper to come in was piloted by First Lieutenant Rick Griffith. His Huey came in and scooped up the team, but he only made it about seventy-five feet into the air before his chopper was hit by an RPG. The tail boom swings around, this the main rotor and ends up ripping the chopper in half, and the Huey plunges down into the jungle floor, ejecting Zabitosky out of the chopper in the process. He hits the ground, breaking his ribs, crushing vertebrae

in his back, and he comes to to find his fatigues on fire. So he has to put himself out, and despite the burns and injuries, he jumps up and goes back to the blazing chopper and pulls Rick Griffith from the chopper. He was further burned in the process, goes back, and he's got more shrapnel wounds from the explosions going on, but he said the screams from his fellow recon men in the back and the men burning alive, he couldn't live with himself if he didn't go back. So Zab turned back, went to the chopper again, and pulled the severely wounded copilot John Cook to safety. And just as he's pulling Cook free the fuel tanks on the chopper explode, propelling both Cook and Zabitosky free of the wreckage but further wounding him and burning him in the process. The rest of the guys in the chopper perished along with team leader Doug Glover who had the premonition that he wouldn't live. So by the time another chopper comes in to finally rescue the guys who are still on the ground, including the survivors, the two pilots, Zab had tossed out his final grenade and fired the last bullets from his 9mm pistol. And although he weighed only 130 pounds, he's horribly burned, he's got broken bones in his back, crushed ribs, shrapnel wounds, he's still picking up these pilots and carrying them toward the extraction point until they could get another chopper to come in and pick them up. Zabitosky would spend six weeks recovering in a hospital, but he would return to FOB-2 to help train more teams for the future, including my uncle in law's team. But it'd be another year before he made it back to Washington to be presented with his Medal of Honor by President Nixon. Now, the third man from FOB-2 to be honored with the Medal of Honor was a guy named John James Kedenburg out of New York. He reached Kon Tum in March of 1968, just weeks after Zabitosky's heroic mission. Kedenburg was assigned to recon team Nevada, and within months he was running the team. And that doesn't sound like much, but when the base first started, the early recon teams were all run by master sergeants. That was what was preferred, but as the war went on, attrition and wounds happened, they started stepping up people that had the quality, the courage, the leadership, and John Kedenburg was one of those guys. And instead of being a master sergeant he was a mere specialist first class. His biggest mission was on June 12, 1968 when his ten-man team went in--Kedenburg, his one-one or assistant team leader Steve Roche, and eight South Vietnamese indigenous troops. They were inserted into southern Laos near the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Their mission was to put motion detectors along the trail and then later to call in air strikes against NVA convoys moving down the trail. The following morning they'd moved within eighty yards of that position when they were suddenly engaged in a massive firefight with the NVA. Then during the battle that ensued, one of the South Vietnamese team members panicked and took off through the jungle. They lost him. Kedenburg covered his men as they retreated into some bomb craters where they knew they had a decent chance for an LZ extraction there. They'd start up a battalion-size force, so they were vastly outnumbered, and even their call for a Prairie Fire emergency let them in a severe situation. Fast moving F-14 navy jets and propeller driven A-1 Skyraiders bombed and napalmed the NVA forces for the next half hour. One of Kedenburg's men, one of his indigenous men, was killed during the firefight, but word finally came that the choppers were on their way. The first chopper that came in dropped their harnesses and managed to pull out some of the team. The next one that came in, they were rigged with McGuire rigs, which were basically 150-foot long repelling ropes. The team members could use their karabiners and snap onto the ropes. The first pilot, I said, got out four of the team members. The next chopper that came in was under such intense fire, he only got one of the indigenous troops out before he was shot out of the zone, as they say, and had to lift off to avoid destroying his chopper. So that leaves John Kedenburg the one-zero, his one-one Steve Roche and two indigenous men left with the final chopper to try and get them out. That pilot was Mike Berry. His bird was codenamed Ghost Rider 153. He

lowered four of the McGuire rigs through the triple canopy. That's kind of what they called the three layers of the jungle forest that they had to drop the lines down through to extract these men. Now, as Berry's hovering there they come under intense gunfire. Steve Roche and the team interpreter snap on, they're ready to go, and then Kedenburg and his last indigenous man snap on, and they're about to take off, when suddenly this last man come running from the jungle, the trooper they'd lost the hour before in the firefight. So Kedenburg unhooks himself, gets his last man and snaps him into the rig there, a selfless act, and by that time the chopper's taking all kind of hits and has to take off. Berry pulls free, and Kedenburg waves him out of there to save the guys, and he's got to stay behind and take cover until potentially somebody can come back, probably the next day, to get him, because it's right at dark-thirty. And it's no no-big-deal lifting out of there, no simple thing. Roche and his other guys are drug through the trees, through that triple canopy. Steve Roche suffers a broken nose, numerous lacerations, which was not uncommon for these recon guys as they were being extracted from these missions. But in the process John Kedenburg is left behind. He stays in contact with Cubby Rider, former recon man that flew in single engine planes to monitor and access the situation. They stayed in verbal contact for a while, and they could see him gunning down enemy opponents and running for his life and trying to take cover, but then with darkness they finally had to leave him behind until another group could be brought in and try to get him. This is the group here. I mentioned Bright Light teams before. In this case the word went out that we need a team to try and save Kedenburg or see what happened to him. So four Green Berets are on this team. It's led by Jim Tramel. He's the new one-zero of Recon Team Illinois. The former one-zero that was about to transfer from the base, Sherman Batman, went along with him for experience. Specialist 5th class Tom Cunningham was a good friend of Kedenburg's. He volunteered to go. And then a rather green recon medic named Brian Loucks went along as the fourth member along with their indigenous crew. That's a story in itself that would take a long time to relate, but everybody in that group, all the Green Berets were wounded in the process. They all earned Bronze Stars. Unfortunately Tramel's men did the Bright Light, and they found the body of John Kedenburg and found that he'd gone down fighting, taken out NVA with him, apparently died of either bullet or shrapnel wounds. But they did recover his body, his gear and his communication books, and brought those back so that he could be given a proper burial. And he was awarded the third Medal of Honor for an FOB-2 man. Now the next man to get it, the fourth soldier from Kon Tum to earn the Medal of Honor, was a guy named Robert Louis Howard. He would retire many years later as a colonel. In fact he was here at Pritzker Military Library years ago doing a special about his Medal of Honor. Some of you may have seen that. Bob Howard came from a military family. His great grandfather was killed during WWI, his father and some of his uncles gave their lives as paratroopers during WWII, and as a boy growing up in poor Alabama, he learned how to fight back against bullies as taught to him by his grandma, how to stand his ground. He passed on a potential football scholarship to join the army, and Bob went to Vietnam in 1965 as a member of the 101st Airborne Division. When he arrived in Kon Tum in April of 1967 he was assigned as a recon company supply sergeant, since he had some background there. He did the job with pride, but he wanted to fight. So he volunteered every chance he could get. They would do what they called straphanger missions, where you did a fill-in role for a team member that was out or sick or hurt. You would strap hang as a volunteer with a recon team. So Bob Howard did that every chance he could get. The first one-zero that took him out told me later, he said, "Howard just loved combat." Didn't pass up any chance he could get. In November of '67 Bob Howard went out with Johnny Gilreath's Spike Team Colorado to destroy an NVA supply cache. It became quite a fight, Howard gunning down four NVA in the process with a

single magazine before the team was pinned down by an enemy machine gun emplacement. Three different times Howard went in and took out the gunners and the machine gun emplacement with his M-16, with a grenade, and even with an anti-tank rocket launcher. The one-zero Gilreath told me later about Howard, he said, "He was one of the only men I ever knew that, he ran toward the enemy at all times. The man had no fear." His superiors were so impressed with his action with that Spike team Colorado that he was written up for the Medal of Honor. In this case it was downgraded to a Distinguished Service Cross. The second highest honor, so he continued to serve with recon. Normally if you're written up for that Medal of Honor they would pull you out of missions across the fence. That didn't happen here, so he got to keep running missions, which he loved to do. Three weeks later he would earn a Bronze Star with valor on another mission. Howard ended up being wounded on fourteen different occasions and would earn eight Purple Hearts. He continued to save lives, continued to earn medals, and during a SLAM mission I talked about briefly before in 1968, he helped bring back a POW, was wounded in the process, and was written up for the Medal of Honor a second time. In this case it was downgraded to a Silver Star Medal. There he is bringing in one of the POWs. Bob Howard was still recovering from shrapnel wounds on December 8, 1968 when he volunteered for another mission in which he earned yet another Purple Heart and another Air Medal for heroism. Those wounds from that missions were still healing in late December when he was called in for a special mission in Cambodia where one of the Green Berets, Staff Sergeant Bob Sheridan, had gone missing in action. Howard volunteered to do a Bright Light mission to go in for the body of Sheridan on December 30, 1968. He went in with three other Green Berets and thirty South Vietnamese counterparts, all landed by choppers in this hot area. A little more than a half hour into the mission the platoon was hit with a superior-size NVA force, and a grenade landed close enough by that it blew Bob Howard about ten feet backwards, wounded him, and left him unconscious. When he came to he found that his gear was blown apart and shredded, had shrapnel wounds all through his body, and he was unable to get up and walk. And as he composes himself he looks around and sees an NVA soldier moving through the kill zone with a flamethrower burning up his indigenous teammates that are wounded and on the ground, and he sees his lieutenant wounded lying on the ground nearby also, so Howard has to do anything he can to save himself. He pulls a grenade, and he's looking eyeball-to-eyeball at this soldier with the flamethrower, and finally decides we can kill each other, but he tosses it, forces the guy to take cover, and he's able to kind of extract himself briefly from that situation. So Howard crawls to his lieutenant and wants to start dragging him back into the platoon's perimeter. So the Prairie Fire emergency's been called, we've got A1 Skyraiders delivering bombs and napalm to try to knock down the opposition. Howard continues, despite his painful wounds, to try to help people, to get his officer brought back in, to administer first aid. He's hit by another explosion that blows him backwards and wounds him again. He finally has to call for a weapon because his weapon's been destroyed, and his fingers are so shredded by shrapnel he has to just work his hand around the gun to be able to shoot charging NVA as they're coming toward him while he's lying on the ground. He keeps crawling for safety helping downed comrades and bringing the officer back, but during this whole time Bob Howard refused treatment for his own wounds, wanted all the other guys to be helped first throughout the firefight. It goes on to near darkness, and by the time darkness is setting in you can imagine it's pretty gloomy that these guys are gonna have to go through the night badly wounded, some of them bleeding out. So they set up strobe lights and prop Bob Howard up in the middle and put strobes on him and call in strikes perilously close to their own unit to try to knock down the NVA. Some of the explosions are so close that Howard and others are actually hit by

shrapnel from their own guys, but they did what they had to do to get through it. Now, Bob's lieutenant died during the long firefight, but he made sure to bring the body out and bring it back. By the time the last of the wounded men were loaded onto the Hueys that took them out, he got aboard, and he simply passed out from exhaustion and blood loss. And for this mission Bob Howard is written up a third time for the Medal of Honor, and this time it would go through, but it would take more than a year for the paperwork and the process to happen. And by the time he got to the White House to get his medal from Nixon he'd collected another Purple Heart along the way. So, pretty impressive guy. Ended up doing thirty-six years of service for America. More than a year would pass at FOB-2 with lots of action, lots of recon missions, before the final member of the base recon company earned the unit's fifth and final Medal of Honor. He was sergeant Franklin Douglas Miller, the one-zero of Recon Team Vermont. His team was flown on January 5, 1970 into a tri-border area there where Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia come together, and they actually walked into their target area into Cambodia. His RT Vermont included four Montagnards and three Green Berets. His one-two or third Green Beret that was running the radio was a guy named Ed Blyth, who was making only his second mission across the fence. There's Ed there. Just hours into the mission as they get into Cambodia, one of the Montagnards makes the foolish mistake of pulling on a wire that turns out to be a trip wire to a booby trap. Sets off an explosion that badly wounds a number of the men of the team and also alerts the enemy who had that out just for that kind of purpose. So the remainder of the day is an intense escape, firefight, and trying to set up perimeters to avoid the enemy that's coming after them. They end up calling in a Prairie Fire emergency, and again we've got--they prefer the A-1 Skyraiders because they were the propeller-driven. They're the low and slow, as they call them. They could come in very low and drop the ordinance more precisely on the spot that they wanted. So radioman Ed Blyth is doing the talking back and forth while Doug Miller has crawled out to fight the enemy and take them on and keep the perimeter secure. First Lieutenant Don Ingbretson was one of the guys flying the Skyraiders. He and his superior, the wing leader, came in on Blyth's call to drop some bomblets, some CBU, and napalm. And Blyth said, "Just bring it in, drop it right on us." Well, the wing leader said, "Don't do it, you're forbidden, do not do it. Abort, pull out." Ingbretson decided to go ahead and do it, ignored the orders, dropped the load right there on the recon company hoping he would miss them. And one of the mics was open, so all he hears is screaming and yelling. His first thoughts were, "Oh my god, I've killed all the recon guys I'm trying to save." And a few seconds pass, and Blyth comes back on the radio and says, "Do it again. Do it again. Hit them again." So Don felt pretty good about that in spite of potential court martial from his wing leader ignoring order. And so they come back in and continue to do bombing runs, napalm, CBU. Doug Miller by this time is kind of doing a one-man battle against the NVA, lobbing grenades, using his M-16 to cut down the enemy. And during the course of the fight and the bombing a lot more men are wounded. Miller takes shrapnel in his chest, his left arm, and his leg. Bleeding pretty good, but he continues to fight and continues to lead his men. Both of his Green Berets are badly injured along with a lot of the Montagnards. Ed Blyth the radioman had his legs and his left side ripped open by shrapnel, had a chunk of his left thumb ripped off by shrapnel, and he told me the hardest part about that was bleeding out so bad trying to wrap it up so that the blood didn't cause dirt and debris to stick to his magazines and foul them up. That was his biggest concern during the fight. Now, as Miller's team continued to fight, luckily they had a saving grace, that there was a Hatchet Force platoon not too far by, and some of the men were sent in to hike in and try to make it there on foot, because this is such a long sustained fight. There's a Green Beret medic named Andy Brown who was sent in with a group of his Montagnards. He fought his way in, he lost all of his indigenous men

in the process. Andy was pretty badly wounded during the process, but he made it to Doug Miller, and by the time he got to that one-zero, he found him propped up against a tree, he was down to like his last magazine, he'd gone through all of his grenades, but the Hatchet Force moved in and helped save the day. But Miller would later say that was his personal Vietnamese Alamo ordeal, the last stand there. By the time it's over every member of the team was badly wounded. You can see them here at the Pleiku Hospital after getting some treatment. Miller was the last one to go out. He made sure everybody on the team was extracted first before he jumped in the last chopper. And because of his valor under fire that day he was written up pretty quickly for the Medal of Honor. Like others it would take about a year to run the course, but he did make his way to the White House in 1971 to get the Medal of Honor from President Nixon. He was the fifth and final man to pick up that honor from FOB-2. Now, in *Uncommon Valor*, I try to tell the story of not just the eight men that earned Distinguished Service Crosses, but the five guys who would receive the medal of honor. But that's just part of the story. We all know that people how served in Vietnam, there were so many acts of valor that went unrecognized, but since the Civil War no single company has boasted as many Medal of Honor recipients as SOG's forward operating bases number two did. The other heroes in a lot of cases, one of the one-zeroes told me, he knew plenty of them. In some cases the officers didn't submit the proper paperwork or take the time to write them up, in other cases there weren't enough living witnesses or any living witnesses for the heroic deeds that took place there for men that other said by and far should have received a Medal of Honor. Who got it and who didn't, lot of speculation there, but the five that did earn it certainly did. People like Bob Howard, respected many years later, much less respected by every man that ever served with him there. But the SOG statistics, during the service period ten SOG teams went missing. Fourteen more teams were overrun or destroyed completely, and fifty of the SOG operatives still remain MIA to this day. A large number of them were wounded multiple times so that at times the casualty rate was almost beyond the people that were there. If a guy had been wounded five, six, seven times and continued to go back, each one counted, and all those wounds whether he was written up for a Purple Heart or not. Some of those guys could care less about that. Some didn't bother to do the paperwork. But according to SOG records they were an elite and especially deadly unit. At its peak efficiency more than 150 NVA soldiers were killed for every SOG recon man that was lost. That's one of the highest combat efficiency ratings for any military unit in US history. But it was not until the mid-1990s when FOB2 veteran John Plaster put out his groundbreaking book called *SOG* that more Americans became aware of what the Studies and Observations Group did during the Vietnam War. On April 4, 2001 a number of the SOG veterans gathered at Fort Bragg, and they finally received a long overdue presidential unit citation, twenty-nine years after they had run their last mission. They were sworn to secrecy for decades, and many of them couldn't tell their spouses or their kids anything for decades, but former Brigadier General Jack Singlaub, seen there in Las Vegas--he was a former chief SOG, he probably summed it up best, and he said his SOG special forces veterans, with them we had a collection of heroes that was not equaled. I couldn't agree anything more with that. That's why I wanted to do a book like this. Not just my relative's story, but to expand it to go into some of these other heroes, can't touch them all, but these kind of people, their valor, their sacrifices, their selfless service, that's the kind of stuff that our American freedom is born upon and what many of you guys have fought for and our ancestors and relatives have done. So in one little way I hope to pay some kind of tribute to these special veterans.

(Applause)

1: We call it PTSD now. Did these guys suffer from that a lot?

Moore: They do. I'll paraphrase it. I've been to some of their reunions with the assault helicopter group and with the SOG veterans, and they get together in Vegas every year in October for the Special Forces reunion. And one of them told me, he said, all of us are a little--I'll paraphrase it--screwed up in a lot of ways. We may look normal, but inside we're pretty messed up. But we carry on. We've had families, we've had jobs, we move on with our life, but we carry this stuff around inside of us. Even Uncle Wilson. Calm, quiet-natured kind of guy. You wouldn't think much, but when you hear about the hand-to-hand fighting and killing, things he did and bringing back prisoners, it's a different thing over there. And unfortunately our country didn't recognize these people as they should have or as WWII veterans were honored when they came back. It was a different thing, and that probably adds to what you had to carry around inside you, too.

2: Thank you. I wanted you to explain a little bit more of the secrecy of these missions. I mean, did it have to do with the fact that, like going into Cambodia and Laos was technically illegal? And if it was technically illegal, I mean, who cared? Politically, what was the concern there?

Moore: Especially in the early part of the war, the US of course denied that we were doing any of that, even when it started at twelve miles or expanded later. If you were killed or captured your family would be told that you were just simply missing in action, or if it was reported by the enemy they would say, "We have no idea why they were there or how they got there." So you were taking a big risk. It was all strictly volunteer. There was a special way that it was done that you volunteered, and they went through a lot of briefing, and at any time you could opt out, and they'd take a break. If you want to step out and go downstairs and excuse yourself, not a word is gonna be said. We'll put you in some other recon duty. No problem.

2: That's because of the technical illegality of one of these--

Moore: It was a covert war. It's being run behind enemy lines and denied. They were trying to prove or disprove some of the opposition saying, "Oh, there's no NVA over here. They're not in our countries." And we wanted to go in and prove they were there, and we would pull prisoners out, or we would get photo intelligence to discredit some of the lies that were being told. But they had to sign documents of secrecy after the war when these guys were discharged, that they couldn't talk about it for twenty-five years or for certain periods of time, or face penalties, court martial, and all the legal proceedings. So they had to keep mum. Some of the guys I talked to--"Ahh, I can't talk about that." I'd say, "Yeah, you can." You know, they didn't know that they could talk a little bit about it now.

3: How hard was it for SOG to recruit the indigenous troops, and was there difficulty with the Green Berets communicating with the indigenous troops?

Moore: A lot of them spoke very good English. Each team had a team interpreter as one of the senior indigenous leaders there. A lot of cases they were more than willing to fight because they being local people whether Chinese origin or whether it was the Montagnards or other people that were there, they'd been badly mistreated for years by the people coming in there, and they hated the NVA just as much because they would come into the villages, rape and kill and burn the villages. So you lost brothers and siblings and wives. A lot of them were more than happy to go fight. And the pay they received was equivalent to a high-ranking officer if they were fighting in their own home country. It wasn't a ton of money for a US serviceman, but for the local guys it was good money, helped support their family, and a lot of them loved to go out and kill to get revenge, so they were pretty easily recruited in a lot of cases. And they were great fighters, great scouts, because they knew the jungle, they knew the terrain. Thank you. (Applause)

Williams: Thank you to Stephen Moore for an outstanding discussion and to the United States Naval Institute for sponsoring this program. The book is *Uncommon Valor: The Recon Company That Earned Five Medals of Honor and Included America's Most Decorated Green Beret*, published by the Naval Institute Press. To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit us in person or online at [PritzkerMilitary.org](http://PritzkerMilitary.org). Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.

Voiceover: Visit the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. Explore original exhibits on military history or be a part of a live studio audience. Watch other episodes of *Pritzker Military Presents*. Find out What's On at [PritzkerMilitary.org](http://PritzkerMilitary.org).

(Theme music)

Voiceover: *Pritzker Military Presents* is made possible by members of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library and its sponsors. The views and opinions expressed in this program are not necessarily those of the Museum and Library.

(Theme music)

Voiceover: The preceding program was produced by the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.