

A harrowing New Year's Day attack on US special operators during the Vietnam War featured a sinister tactic

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UH-1P helicopters from the US Air Force's 20th Special Operations Squadron fly into Cambodia in 1970. US Air Force/Capt. Billie D Tedford



A SOG recon team getting ready for an operation in Cambodia. Courtesy picture

US special-operations forces played a central role in the Vietnam War. The Pentagon even created a covert special-ops unit, MACV-SOG, to conduct cross-border operations. MACV-SOG teams were highly effective, which made them a high-priority target for North Vietnam.

During the Vietnam War, the US military relied heavily on special-operations forces to wage what was a predominately unconventional conflict. Individual units, such as the Army Green Berets, Navy SEALs, and Air Commandos, supported the war strategy, but the Pentagon also created a dedicated special-operations organization. Military Assistance Command Vietnam-Studies and Observations Group (MACV-SOG) was a covert special-operations unit that conducted operations in Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, North Vietnam, and elsewhere. Their highly classified missions came at a cost. The unit had a 100% casualty rate, meaning all its members were wounded at least once or killed in action. The outside risk they faced was matched by their effectiveness. Time and again, MACV-SOG teams achieved great results.

The North Vietnamese and Vietcong understood the danger MACV-SOG troops posed and went to extremes to kill or capture them. A mole in MACV-SOG headquarters in Saigon provided key intelligence to the North Vietnamese about the recon teams' movements and operations. SOG operators in the field were often at a bigger disadvantage than they realized. But the North Vietnamese went a step further, attacking the "SOG problem" at its root: MACV-SOG bases. One such attack on a forward operating base near Da Nang in August 1968 killed 18 Green Berets in what is still the deadliest day in the unit's history. A few months later, in the middle of the winter holidays, the North Vietnamese sought to replicate that success with a surprise attack on New Year's Day.

New Year's 'wishes'

The North Vietnamese and Vietcong usually planned or launched attacks during US or Vietnamese holidays, relying on surprise to compensate for the US's overwhelming technological superiority. The most well-known example is the Tet Offensive in early 1968. Launched during local new year's celebrations, the massive, coordinated assault across South Vietnam was defeated militarily at heavy cost for both sides but helped turn the war in North Vietnam's favor.

"We always had heightened alerts for all US and major Vietnamese holidays," such as July Fourth or the Vietnamese New Year, said John Stryker Meyer, a legendary Green Beret who completed two tours with MAVG-SOG.



US military policemen, one of them wounded, at the US Embassy compound in Saigon during the Tet Offensive, January 31, 1968. Associated Press



Phu Bai airfield, south of Hue, in April 1965 US Marine Corps/Gy. Sgt. Ayers

"They seldom hit a base when the base was prepared. They preferred the element of surprise, such as the August 23, 1968, attack at FOB 4 in Da Nang, an attack launched after more than a year of planning and planned to strike on a moonless night," Meyer told Insider.

A few days before New Year's Eve 1968, the SOG camp commander at Forward Operating Base 1 in Phu Bai, near Hue, ordered his troops to prepare for a surprise attack at the turn of the year.

In addition to receiving intelligence, the base commander had several indications of an imminent attack. SOG special operators had found markers on the roof of the base lounge, which attackers would use to guide mortar rounds. A Green Beret also caught a local worker counting steps to the camp lounge, another tactic to guide mortar or artillery rounds. The SOG compound, which adjoined a larger base, was supposed to be highly classified. But the North Vietnamese had agents and informants almost everywhere and knew of the SOG base and its role as a launchpad for cross-border operations.

Meyer, who has written extensively about American commandos' secret war in Indochina, said SOG commandos, aware of the potential for surprise attacks, took defensive measures.

"At FOB 1 we had an internal defense element that our [Special Forces] men stayed close to. We had trench lines, mortar pits, areas of responsibility to go to if an attack was launched," Meyer said.

"To the north and the east there were at least three minefields — the first was the old French minefield, then two additional ones SF put into place," while to the south, behind FOB 1, was a South Vietnamese Army training unit and to the west a high fence, Meyer added.

The SOG operators held a vigilant New Year's Eve celebration, ready for an attack. Their base faced only a few poorly sighted mortar rounds, however. It was on the field in Laos where disaster struck SOG.

A New Year's disaster

While the SOG commandos at FOB 1 waited for an attack, Recon Team Diamondback — composed of US and South Vietnamese troops, a common feature of SOG teams — was on a recon mission in Laos. In the final hours of 1968, a forward air controller did two radio checks with the team, a standard procedure to make sure a team on the ground was OK. But on January 1, 1969, RT Diamondback called for an urgent tactical extraction because of heavy enemy activity in the area. The North Vietnamese might not have spotted them, but their sheer numbers made it almost inevitable that they would find the SOG operators.

As the SOG radioman was talking to the controller in an airplane overhead, chaos erupted. The forward air controller heard explosions and heavy AK-47 fire. He tried to contact the team with no success.

After some desperate moments, a South Vietnamese member of RT Diamondback came on the radio and, in shaken English, informed the aircraft that the team's three American members had been killed in a surprise attack.



A SOG team reconnoiters the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.SOG



MACV-SOG members with indigenous operators.US Army Special Operations Command

The South Vietnamese of the team had been left unhurt — a calculated move by the North Vietnamese to undermine the SOG teams and sow division among their members. Killing only Americans left the teams shorthanded and was meant to stoke fears about North Vietnam's infiltration of the South Vietnamese military. By the late 1960s, the North was thought to have tens of thousands of troops and support personnel in the South, helping organize and conduct attacks. The tactic worked at first. Recon teams began questioning the commitment and loyalty of their South Vietnamese members. But strong personal leadership at the tactical and organizational level helped the unit maintain its cohesion. The organization was inherently flexible, and team leaders—or "one-zeros"—were chiefly responsible for their team and its culture. It fell on them to dismiss any distrust created by the sinister North Vietnamese tactic.

SOG teams were soon successfully hunting across the fence again.