

MACV-SOG: A Task Force of Exceptional Valor

COL Lee Van Arsdale, USA (Ret)

LTC Mike Berendt, USA (Ret)

Colorado Springs Chapter, CO



The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam – Studies and Observations Group (MACV-SOG) was established on 24 January 1964 in the Republic of Vietnam to function as one of the U.S. military’s first Joint Special Operations Task Forces. Commanded by a U.S. Army Special Forces Colonel, the unit was a highly classified, multi-service team that conducted covert, unconventional warfare operations in North and South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. SOG grew in size and scope until it was disbanded in 1972 after having participated in most of the significant campaigns of the Vietnam War, primarily conducting clandestine missions.¹ SOG missions included:

Strategic reconnaissance; Direct action; Sabotage; Personnel recovery (friendly and enemy); Psychological Operations (PSYOPS); Counter-Intelligence; Bomb damage assessment; and Rescue of downed pilots.²

Army Veteran Keith McKim is a former Green Beret who served multiple tours of duty with the MACV-SOG and was awarded the Silver Star for Valor, the Bronze Star, and Purple Heart. He has authored two audio CDs honoring the nine extraordinary men of his unit that were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Keith’s friend, Army Colonel Lee Van Arsdale, a companion of the Colorado Springs Chapter of MOWW, invited him to speak at a recent Chapter meeting.

Colonel Van Arsdale is a 1974 Distinguished Graduate of the United States Military Academy and a decorated combat veteran. In the course of his 25-year Army career, he served in leadership positions in three combat zones, primarily in Special Forces, with 11 years spent in the First Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta (Airborne). He was also awarded the Silver Star for his actions during Operation Gothic Serpent, the August to October 1993 Task Force (TF) Ranger deployment to Somalia, where he heroically led a relief column to rescue the survivors of downed helicopters in Mogadishu, an operation depicted in the book and movie “*Black Hawk Down*”.



Col Van Arsdale and wife Marilee with Keith McKim

The following is a synopsis of Keith McKim's presentation on the MACV-SOG from Colonel Van Arsdale's perspective.

The Colorado Springs Chapter of MOWW was recently treated to a spellbinding presentation from Keith McKim, a Vietnam veteran who served multiple tours, beginning in 1964, with the storied SOG. Now declassified, the cover for SOG was the innocuous Studies and Observation Group, but in reality it was the Special Operations Group. This unit accounted for more per capita Medals of Honor and a higher enemy body count than any other unit in the war.

Keith showed off his chops as a master story teller by warming up the audience with some jokes and humorous anecdotes. This put everyone in a relaxed mood for the serious meat of the presentation, an overview of SOG and an amazing account of Master Sergeant Roy Benavidez, Medal of Honor recipient.

As Keith recounted, SOG was a highly classified unit, so by definition everything it did was also classified. It wasn't until a few years ago that the Department of Defense declassified much of what SOG did, to include the existence of the unit. It wasn't until then that the many people who served with such distinction could talk about what they did, let alone write about it or give a public presentation.

Keith pointed out one remarkable statistic that struck us all: SOG had over a 100% KIA/WIA rate, made possible by the fact that many of the SOG-men were wounded multiple times. Such was the nature of the esprit in SOG, that as soon as a wounded member was able, he was back conducting operations with his old mates, when many of them could have used the wound as a ticket home.

Another remarkable statistic is the damage inflicted on the enemy by these small teams, usually comprised of a small group of Americans and the rest made up of indigenous troops, typically Montagnards or Hmong. This damage was the result of both direct action and the highly lethal use of a variety of aerial munitions called in from the SOG men on the ground. A number of SOG men were so effective that they actually had bounties placed on them by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong.

As amazing as the SOG overview was, Keith's recounting of MSG Roy Benavidez' actions that led to his Medal of Honor was totally riveting. A quick read of MSG Benavidez' Medal of Honor citation tells us why he richly deserved our nation's highest award for valor, and Keith went well beyond just the citation to weave an incredible tale of sacrifice, bravery, and character.

Master Sergeant (then Staff Sergeant) Roy P. Benavidez United States Army, who distinguished himself by a series of daring and extremely valorous actions on 2 May 1968 while assigned to Detachment B56, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), 1st Special Forces, Republic of Vietnam. On the morning of 2 May 1968, a 12-man Special Forces Reconnaissance Team was inserted by helicopters in a dense jungle area west of Loc Ninh, Vietnam to gather intelligence information about confirmed large-scale enemy activity. This area was controlled and routinely patrolled by the North Vietnamese Army. After a short period of time on the ground, the team met heavy enemy resistance, and requested emergency extraction. Three helicopters attempted extraction, but were unable to land due to intense enemy small arms and anti-aircraft fire. Sergeant Benavidez was at the Forward Operating Base in Loc Ninh monitoring the operation by radio when these helicopters

returned to off-load wounded crewmembers and to assess aircraft damage. Sergeant Benavidez voluntarily boarded a returning aircraft to assist in another extraction attempt. Realizing that all the team members were either dead or wounded and unable to move to the pickup zone, he directed the aircraft to a nearby clearing where he jumped from the hovering helicopter, and ran approximately 75 meters under withering small arms fire to the crippled team. Prior to reaching the team's position he was wounded in his right leg, face, and head. Despite these painful injuries, he took charge, repositioning the team members and directing their fire to facilitate the landing of an extraction aircraft, and the loading of wounded and dead team members. He then threw smoke canisters to direct the aircraft to the team's position. Despite his severe wounds and under intense enemy fire, he carried and dragged half of the wounded team members to the awaiting aircraft. He then provided protective fire by running alongside the aircraft as it moved to pick up the remaining team members. As the enemy's fire intensified, he hurried to recover the body and classified documents on the dead team leader. When he reached the leader's body, Sergeant Benavidez was severely wounded by small arms fire in the abdomen and grenade fragments in his back. At nearly the same moment, the aircraft pilot was mortally wounded, and his helicopter crashed. Although in extremely critical condition due to his multiple wounds, Sergeant Benavidez secured the classified documents and made his way back to the wreckage, where he aided the wounded out of the overturned aircraft, and gathered the stunned survivors into a defensive perimeter. Under increasing enemy automatic weapons and grenade fire, he moved around the perimeter distributing water and ammunition to his weary men, re-instilling in them a will to live and fight. Facing a buildup of enemy opposition with a beleaguered team, Sergeant Benavidez mustered his strength, began calling in tactical air strikes and directed the fire from supporting gunships to suppress the enemy's fire and so permit another extraction attempt. He was wounded again in his thigh by small arms fire while administering first aid to a wounded team member just before another extraction helicopter was able to land. His indomitable spirit kept him going as he began to ferry his comrades to the craft. On his second trip with the wounded, he was clubbed with additional wounds to his head and arms before killing his adversary. He then continued under devastating fire to carry the wounded to the helicopter. Upon reaching the aircraft, he spotted and killed two enemy soldiers who were rushing the craft from an angle that prevented the aircraft door gunner from firing upon them. With little strength remaining, he made one last trip to the perimeter to ensure that all classified material had been collected or destroyed, and to bring in the remaining wounded. Only then, in extremely serious condition from numerous wounds and loss of blood, did he allow himself to be pulled into the extraction aircraft. Sergeant Benavidez' gallant choice to join voluntarily his comrades who were in critical straits, to expose himself constantly to withering enemy fire, and his refusal to be stopped despite numerous severe wounds, saved the lives of at least eight men. His fearless personal leadership, tenacious devotion to duty, and extremely valorous actions in the face of overwhelming

odds were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service, and reflect the utmost credit on him and the United States Army.

All told, 13 warfighters of the MACV-SOG were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor and 22 received the Distinguished Service Cross, the nation's two highest awards for valor. Due to the classified nature of the organization, their citations never acknowledged their service with the MACV-SOG Task Force, only the Military Service unit to which they were assigned. One USAF helicopter pilot, 2 Navy SEALs, one Army medic, and 9 Army Green Berets were awarded the Medal of Honor – 3 of them posthumously.³

The Colorado Springs chapter of MOWW is proud to salute Keith McKim for an exceptional presentation and especially for his service to our nation.



Keith McKim receives a Certificate from
COS Commander, COL Steve Shambach

Footnotes:

1. Seals, Robert. USASOC History Office, 25 January 2019, *MACV-SOG History* (https://www.army.mil/article/216498/macv_sog_history)
2. Wikipedia. *Military Assistance Command, Vietnam – Studies and Observations Group* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_Assistance_Command_Vietnam)
3. IBID.