

# THE ETHER ZONE

U.S. ARMY SPECIAL FORCES  
DETACHMENT B-52, PROJECT DELTA

R. C. Morris

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## THE ETHER ZONE

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## Advanced Praise for *The Ether Zone*:

*The Ether Zone should be a must-read for those who are aspiring to enter our Special Forces, or other elite units where guts, innovation, and dedication are essential ingredients for success. Or, for that matter, anyone who would like a down-and-dirty vicarious experience in our Special Forces.*

– David J. Baratto, Major General, U.S. Army Retired  
Former Commander, John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School

*Project Delta arguably marked the greatest advance in U.S. Special Operations since Colonel Aaron Bank devised the A-team. Ray Morris lays it out chapter and verse, concept and combat... What a book!*

– MAJ Jim Morris, USA (Ret)  
Author, *War Story*, *Fighting Men* and *Above and Beyond*

*Among Vietnam War recon units, Project Delta B-52 was the pioneer and class act that set the standard for everyone else. With *The Ether Zone*, there is at last a book worthy of that little known—and yet legendary—unit! *The Ether Zone* is truly excellent!*

– Kenn Miller, author of *Six Silent Men II* and *Tiger the Lurp Dog*

*Ray Morris, with skill, has assembled a remarkable true history of the then-secret actions of those few brave Nung, Montagnard, Vietnamese and American men who served in B-52 Delta.*

– COL Alan Park, USA (Ret)  
Commander, Project Delta – 1969

*This is a story of unparalleled bravery of one of the most combat-effective units in the Vietnam War, the precursor of today's Delta Force. I was proud to be a part of that unit. An exciting read...places you in the middle of the action!*

– John F. Flanagan, Brigadier General, USAF Retired  
Author, *Vietnam Above the Treetops: A Forward Air Controller Reports*

“These men operate in the Ether Zone of military excellence.”

*General Robert Cushman*  
*Commandant, United States Marine Corps*

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## FOREWORD

IN *THE ETHER ZONE*, RAY MORRIS CARRIES the reader behind the scenes of one of America's premier forces in the Vietnam War. Project Delta provided the eyes and ears for the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam by operating in "no man's land," far from other U.S. forces in what would have been "behind enemy lines" in America's previous wars. The quietest of "The Quiet Professionals," these extraordinary men operated in the most desolate of places, near and in enemy sanctuaries, clandestinely seeking out the enemy and either delivering devastating air power or providing the intelligence needed to support the employment of larger American units in that region.

This small, but highly effective, group of men punched well above their weight! They were an incredibly brave and dedicated professional force who purged their own ranks of those who did not measure up; in some cases they were "characters," but characters that became legends among those fortunate enough to know them.

The personal stories captured by Ray Morris portray instances of incredible heroism, told in anecdotal fashion as the incident unfolded. This tightly-knit group operated clandestinely for five years; they suffered losses, but never missed a beat. To the man, they were single-minded in purpose and intent on being the best. They were proud but not cocky; they were quiet professionals in the finest sense. It is past time that America hears their story.

General Henry H. Shelton, U.S. Army Retired  
14th Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff

The Quiet Professionals:

For all those brave men who have ever served on a  
U.S. Army Special Forces A-Team,  
and for comrades still missing in action.

## INTRODUCTION

# In the Company of Heroes

THE CHILDREN WHO WOULD BECOME THE WARRIORS of Project Delta were born at a time of uncertainty; America was still engaged in World War II. As the nation struggled to revive a sluggish post-war economy, these young boys were developing stalwart character traits reflecting America's values, work ethic, courage and morals. The sons of sturdy American and immigrant stock, they were a diverse lot, representing the best of the best. Their geographical background was rich, an amalgamation of all walks of life. They hailed from cities, both large and small, obscure little towns, farmlands, flatlands, seacoasts, the Rocky Mountain region, low-country, cattle country, the hills of the Ozarks and from the swamps and bayous of Louisiana. At least four had emigrated from Europe, while one had been of French-Canadian descent. Three Project Delta members ultimately rose to the rank of general officer; one achieving acclaim as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Predominately, this collective body represented poor and middle class families, although a few would be from wealth. Most had enlisted while others were drafted—all would volunteer for Project Delta.

Ever since the middle ages and the Roman Army, armies have had elite volunteer units dedicated to the most difficult and dangerous

missions. Despite America's relatively short history, historians have chronicled: Rogers' Rangers (Revolutionary War); Jeb Stuart's Cavalry (Civil War); the tough 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions; Darby's Rangers; and the 1st Special Service Force—the renowned, combined American and Canadian World War II forerunner to today's Special Forces. The soldiers of these unique fighting units had one very important similarity—they all volunteered to fight with an elite unit. Modern soldiers serving in the U.S. Army's most elite combat unit, the United States Army Special Forces, each volunteer a minimum of three times; the majority are also Ranger and/or jungle warfare qualified. Barry Sadler's lyrics in the "Ballad of the Green Beret" state, "One hundred men they'll test today, but only three win the Green Beret." His words hit not far from the mark, but even after this strict selection process, it would still take at least three more years of intensive training to become fully qualified for specific mission deployment.

Among these elite Special Forces units, a relatively few men would become affiliated with even a more select group—they share the distinction of serving in one of the military's most selective, secretive organizations, Project Delta. Handpicked from the elite Special Forces ranks, they were identified as the best of the best from the highly trained United States Army Special Forces.

These noble warriors, caught up in an ignoble war no one wanted, returned home, not to ticker-tape parades as previous American war veterans had experienced, but rather to an ungrateful nation—jeered, derided and spat upon. After receiving little appreciation for their terrible sacrifices, all these men wanted was to quietly rebuild their lives and raise their families in tranquil obscurity. Peace looked good to them. Collectively, during a five-year span, they'd experienced more combat than any other unit in the Vietnam War, and had viewed enough killing and destruction to last a lifetime. Ultimately, some suffered emotionally and remain psychologically scarred; mentally they might wander the Central Highlands's misty hills, forever lost in that conflict—or hope to mend their minds in the relief of hard liquor. Most successfully put it behind them, yet none completely forgot what they once had—and lost.

As others wrote about their Vietnam experiences and Hollywood crafted movies depicting corrupt versions of that bloody conflict—the

leading characters nearly always portrayed as potheads or psychopaths—the weary soldiers of Project Delta preferred to fade into the background to resume their disrupted personal lives.

Throughout the ensuing years, these men have remained close. An integral component within the exclusive Special Operations Association (SOA), they support worthy causes, share stories, resources and strength during annual reunions. While the wartime friendships and unique brotherhood has never diminished, their numbers have shrunk; the years have taken their toll. Many Project Delta members have succumbed to old war wounds, physical and mental, or other war-related illnesses, eventually coming to terms with the death they'd bravely defied so many times in the past.

These graying warriors rely upon their diminishing colleagues for strength, encouragement and purpose, silently grieving for those left behind while honoring those now quietly passing. Today their brotherhood remains as steadfast and strong as when they fought beside each other in Southeast Asia's rugged mountain jungles.

After the war, some former Special Forces soldiers did their best to educate the American public about several highly classified projects: the Studies and Observation Group (SOG), Omega and Sigma. John L. Plaster's *SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam*; Jim Morris's *War Story: The Classic True Story of the First Generation of Green Berets in Vietnam*; and Robin Moore's, *The Green Berets*, are noteworthy. But strong perceptions persist, and the American public still has a hard time believing anything good might have come from this disputed conflict. Most have only heard details from distorted Hollywood script versions, in lieu of eyewitness accounts from those who lived through it.

Stunned by public rejection, Project Delta's members unanimously agreed they would deny interviews and withhold authorization for their story, preferring to remain in the shadows. Only a few citizens know of Project Delta; even fewer have any awareness of the vital contributions and immense sacrifices of this small band of men. Yet for this unique group, whose numbers never exceeded a total of 100 officers and enlisted men, uncommon valor was the order of the day. Delta members generally scorned medals and decorations. Still this small fighting force has collectively been honored with an astounding array: five Distinguished Service Crosses, thirty-seven Silver Stars, 102 Bronze

Stars, forty-eight Army Commendation Medals for valor, twenty-one Air Medals for valor and sixty-eight Purple Hearts for wounds received in combat. Several awards, including one for the Distinguished Service Cross, were flat-out refused by their recipients; the soldiers had insisted their efforts unworthy.

When the policy of being awarded three Purple Hearts could ensure a quick trip back home, scores of Project Delta members could have legitimately claimed the medal, but scoffed at such antics. Sixteen awards for valor are pending and may never be presented.<sup>1</sup> Numerous other decorations for valor (not acknowledged above) were also recommended and/or awarded. With member attrition, the loss of precious institutional memory and recorded documentation, those awards couldn't be included. Project Delta has also been recognized with an impressive number of Unit Awards, above and beyond those for personal valor.

Project Delta, Special Forces Operational Detachment B-52, was the most highly decorated unit of its size, and the second most highly decorated unit in the Vietnam War. (But the first, CIA's Special Forces Project MACV-SOG, larger in numbers, also sustained substantially more casualties than Delta). During the five years and three months of Project Delta's existence, between 1964 and 1970, despite a voracious number of combat operations, only nineteen U.S. personnel were killed while twelve remain missing. This statistic is astounding considering the magnitude of its combat operations, war wounds and personal bravery awards. Most Project Delta personnel received multiples of all three; it is a testament to their superb training and combat skills that such a relatively few men were lost.<sup>2</sup> Retired Army Colonel David Hackworth, in *About Face: Odyssey of an American Warrior*, referred to Project Delta as, "...pound for pound and weighed against its cost... the most effective fighting force in Vietnam."

Records are essentially unavailable for the brave Vietnamese Special Forces, Chinese Nung mercenaries, Montagnard Road Runners and

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Sherman. *Project Delta, After Action Reports, Detachment B-52 (1964-1970)*.

<sup>2</sup> A list of awards is documented in the Annexes.

81st Airborne Ranger Battalion personnel—all vital to Project Delta. They fought bravely along side their American counterparts and will forever remain an integral slice of Project Delta history.

I am honored that the surviving Project Delta members have allowed me to write their story. However, this task was not easy. It was often difficult to get these former operatives to speak about their experiences. Their recollections were mostly about the brave deeds accomplished by others; the telling of others' feats while remarkably skipping over their personal participation as either nominal or insignificant. Only after my review of their awards and decorations, did my evidence indicate quite the contrary. Hence, this account of Project Delta and its brave men result from information I've gleaned from many sources, meshed and woven, much like a patchwork quilt. It's not as if there isn't an abundance of untold stories within this secretive entity, but the U.S. Army Special Forces have a motto: "Quiet Professionals." This trait is unique to their profession and they seldom speak of personal exploits or history, except during quiet conversations with those who have shared their experiences. Yet, if ever an opportunity arises to overhear one of them speak of some exemplary leadership or astonishing bravery, it's wise not to dispute them. It will be the truth. In Detachment B-52, Project Delta, there are no phonies or "wanna-bes."

The Special Ops community has long coveted its privacy. Many did not reflect too kindly upon fellow veteran Barry Sadler for his song "The Ballad of the Green Berets" and scorned Robin Moore's book, *The Green Berets*, and John Wayne's adaptive movie, based on it. In 1965, Robin Moore traveled to Vietnam and visited the 5th Special Forces Group. A Project Delta NCO bumped into him in Nha Trang at the "Playboy Club."

"I don't like your book," said the NCO.

"Have you read it?" Moore asked.

"No," was the curt reply. "I don't have to read it. I don't like it because of all the attention it's giving Special Forces, and for the trouble I know it'll cause us."

Many Special Forces soldiers believed this kind of publicity drew too much unwarranted attention to highly classified missions, inherently dangerous enough without adding notoriety that attracted others to

volunteer, simply because they wanted to “cash-in” and become “heroes.” This philosophy was not, and is not, held in high regard. Attention also tended to evoke jealousy within some conventional Army organizations that resented elite organizations; they often attempted to get their own guys in to share the glory. Schemes and manipulations of this type could cause serious disruption and made Special Ops work all the more difficult and dangerous. Needless to say, attention such as this was not appreciated by the Quiet Professionals.

Despite this notoriety, Project Delta’s veterans seldom speak of their own exploits, generally shunning those who boast of real or imagined adventures while serving with the organization. While they may speak quietly among themselves while honoring those no longer with them, outsiders should consider themselves fortunate to be privy to these tales of bravery and sacrifice.

I’m convinced the recollections are but the tip of the iceberg. Names, dates and locations, while as factual as possible, may still be inaccurate due to lack of records, the passing of key personnel, or fading memories. Although I crosschecked material with Project Delta members or source documents prior to writing, mistakes do happen, and if so, they are purely unintentional. In a situation where information couldn’t be verified, I simply listed the operation and the names of those wounded, killed, missing in action, or receiving awards for valor. If any inaccuracies or omissions are discovered, I humbly apologize to any I may have slighted or failed to mention. It is my sincere hope that my efforts may be judged as a way to honor those living, and in some small way document the enduring legacy of these Project Delta members, for them and their families.

Remarkably, none of the old warriors I interviewed would admit to being a hero, but to a man, they would stubbornly insist that the men they had fought beside certainly had been. Perhaps that’s what makes a man a true hero—an unawareness of personal bravery, the chalking up of heroic actions to the notion that they were, in fact, just doing their jobs and taking care of each other.

In Stephen Ambrose’s book, *Band of Brothers*, years after WWII had ended, Mike Ramsey was questioned by his grandson if he’d been a hero during the war. He pondered for a moment, then replied quietly, “No, but I served in the company of heroes.” It’s time for these Quiet Professionals

to tell their tale. These are heroes America needs to hear about.  
Welcome home, Brothers.

From this day to the ending of the world,  
But we in it shall be remembered—  
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;  
For he today that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother...

*-William Shakespeare, Henry V*



A 1966 "Stars & Stripes" map carried by Project Delta Recon Sergeant James Jarrett

# ONE

1953 – 1964

## Find the Ho Chi Minh Trail!

“A nation reveals itself by the men it produces and the men it honors.”

— *John F. Kennedy, President of the United States*

THE MUTUAL DEFENSE ASSISTANCE ACT OF 1949 allowed the United States to send a small military staff, equipment and related training technicians to Vietnam to act as advisors to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), primarily after the French left in 1953. As an unforeseen consequence, this then became a “foot in the door” for subsequent involvement in the eminent Vietnam War. Although these advisors formed into small military groups, they actually served as an extension of the U.S. diplomatic mission. By 1953, approximately 300 “advisors” were in country, many, highly trained Special Forces personnel stationed in Okinawa, Japan.

In essence, the War in Indochina really never ceased after the French surrendered to the Viet Minh at Dinh Bien Phu, and the country was divided along the 17th parallel, forming the two countries, North

Vietnam and South Vietnam. Almost immediately, the North began incursions into the new South, attempting to influence political decisions. For years, the South Vietnamese government knew that supplies had been reaching VC insurgents from North Vietnam, via the same trails through eastern Laos that'd been used to supply the Viet Minh on their southern battlefields during the French Indochina War.

Vietnam is shaped similar to an hourglass. The center (along the 17th parallel) is the smallest dimension, which allowed the French, and later the South Vietnamese Army, to effectively curtail the movement of supplies and personnel along that narrow point of entry. Aware of this strategy, Communist leaders decided to resurrect hundreds of miles of trails that side-tracked west into Laos. This allowed them to bypass the narrow, well-defended center along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the North and South Vietnamese border, and veer into South Vietnam further south. What had been previously known as the Truong Son Route, the U.S. news media would begin to refer to as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail consists of hundreds of miles of small roads and trails, interdicting South Vietnam by way of Laos. This winding network of footpaths and small roads became a lifeline, essential to the North's incursion into its southern neighbor's territory. More than simply a supply route, it functioned for storage and as bases of operations for forces jumping off into the South. Estimates are that more than seventy percent of communist war materiel and personnel traveled down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.<sup>3</sup>

Since the Laotian military had little control over that rugged, isolated section of their country, Communist porters were soon moving men and supplies without fear of reprisal along these old supply routes. As one senior Laotian officer noted, "The trail runs through tropical, dense forest...The jungles along these trails are almost impenetrable primitive forests; the mountains are steep and rocky. During the French colonial regime, as well as after Laotian independence, this part of the

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<sup>3</sup> *BDM Corporation: A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Volume 1, The Enemy.* McLean, VA, November 30, 1979, 5-14.

country was so remote, isolated and undeveloped that no effort was made to control it.”<sup>4</sup>

Deeply disturbed by this activity, the authorities in Saigon approached its Laotian neighbors to allow forays across the border to suppress such activities. Early negotiations between the South Vietnamese and their Royal Lao Government counterparts allowed the Army of Vietnam (ARVN) to initiate intelligence-gathering operations from Lao Bao, along Route 9, across their western border, and into Laos. Because the Laotian authorities were having their own internal problems, the two governments mutually agreed that ARVN troops would disguise themselves in Laotian Army uniforms to hide the fact that they were Vietnamese. This agreement resulted in a semi-permanent ARVN outpost inside Laos. In 1960, the Royal Lao Government was overthrown by a relatively unknown paratrooper captain, Kong Le, who immediately declared Laos to be neutral. Soon, battles raged across Laos as Kong Le, backed by the Communist Pathet Lao, fought to retain power against a well-organized right-wing group of officers who battled just as determinedly to establish a counter-coup. This internal fighting allowed the NVA to strike up an alliance with the Pathet Lao and to cement them firmer into the border region of Laos. Within a few weeks, in December 1961, North Vietnamese Army elements overran the ARVN outpost in Laos, subsequently using that location to attack into South Vietnam’s Kontum Province. Not since the end of the First Indochina War had northern troops used a base inside Laos to attack South Vietnam; reverberations were felt at top government echelons in Saigon and Washington, D.C.

Coups and political disorganization on both sides of the border prevailed for a few years as the Communists ran operations along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, while basing their troops with impunity inside Laos. It was during this period that U.S. Army Special Forces began to train commandos who would later become the nucleus of the South Vietnamese Army Special Forces (VNSF).

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<sup>4</sup> Brigadier General Soutchay Vongsavanh. “RLG [Royal Laotian Government] Military Operations and Activities in the Laotian Panhandle,” *Indochina Monographs*. Washington, D.C., U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981, 4.



General William C. Westmoreland, Commanding General of MACV and U.S. ground forces in South Vietnam, 1964 – 1968. (Photo courtesy of US Army)

In 1962, the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) was created as the Command and Control element for an ever-increasing volume of equipment, military advisors, technicians and staff to manage rapidly growing efforts to support the tottering Saigon Government. Although MACV's stated mission was to serve as an extension of the diplomatic mission, and as an allied headquarters, when the first major U.S. units arrived in Vietnam (1965), General William C. Westmoreland and his top military commanders became mired in a quandary. This wasn't like fighting in Europe and Korea. They hadn't been trained to fight in Vietnam's terrain,

weren't equipped to fight a war like this, and Army doctrine needed a dramatic shift to accomplish its new mission. The difficult jungle terrain was much more than an obstacle, it offered a formidable place to hide for an enemy who preferred to fight with hit-and-run guerrilla tactics instead of slugging it out toe-to-toe, as the German war machine had done. Military leaders knew the well-trained and equipped U.S. soldiers could defeat this elusive enemy, but first they'd need an effective means to find him. In 1965, William Sullivan, Ambassador to Laos, pointed out, "...impenetrable tree canopy that high-speed, high-flying jets cannot see through...flying over slowly with a helicopter, a road was not discernable from above. It seems clear to me. . .that significant quantities of logistics can still be moving over routes which...our strike aircraft are unable to discern."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State [DOS], telegram from Sullivan to DOS, 21 June 1965, *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS]*, 1964-1968, Volume 27, Laos. [www.state.gov/www/about\\_state/history/vol\\_xxviii](http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xxviii).

## TWO

1964

# Leaping Lena

THE ARVN COMMANDERS, ALONG WITH THEIR U.S. advisors, recognized the urgency for intelligence a full year earlier when initiating a classified operation, code-named “Leaping Lena,” to conduct long range reconnaissance missions across the international border into neutral Laos and to locate enemy bases and foretell enemy troop movement.<sup>6</sup> U.S. Special Forces (USSF) had been operating in Southeast Asia under the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) auspicious control since the French had been kicked out in the 1950s, with, as yet, unpublicized achievements. Organized by the CIA, Leaping Lena initially consisted of several all-Vietnamese recon teams who were trained by U.S. Special Forces personnel on temporary duty (TDY), operating out of Okinawa. These were the predecessors of Project Delta or as the unit’s old timers prefer to say, “Leaping Lena was the *operation*—Project Delta, the name of the *organization*.”

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<sup>6</sup> Steve Sherman. “History of Project Delta – Part 1,” *Project Delta After Action Reports*, [http://project-delta.net/delta\\_history.htm](http://project-delta.net/delta_history.htm)

As early as March 1964, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara expressed his belief that reconnaissance teams were extremely beneficial and urged greater use.<sup>7</sup> In May 1964, Captain (CPT) William J. Richardson Jr., assisted by Sergeant Major (SGM) Paul Payne, handpicked volunteers from an Okinawa-based Special Forces company, flew them to Vietnam and began to train various indigenous ethnic groups; Chinese Nung, Montagnard tribesmen and Vietnamese army personnel for the sensitive Leaping Lena operation. Sergeants Paul Tracy, Bill Edge, Donald Valentine, Tony Duarte, Sergeant First Class (SFC) Henry M. Bailey and SFC Ronald T. Terry were among those on that first team, joined later in the year by NCOs Larry Dickinson, Norbert Weber, Harold "Catfish" Dreblow, Eddie Adams, Ronald Gaffney, James Malia and Sterling Smith. The Command's initial intention was for these USSF personnel to serve only as trainers and advisors, not to accompany the recon teams into the field. Initially, Leaping Lena recon teams were comprised of indigenous personnel (reflecting a cross-section of the local population) termed the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) and a few of the new Vietnamese Special Forces (VNSF) the USSF had been training. In anticipation of their insertion into Laos, Leaping Lena teams had been trained by Green Berets, using proven long range recon patrolling techniques, such as the use of smoke jumping equipment for parachuting into dense foliage.

Vietnamese Army and Air Force elements provided aviation support for Leaping Lena in the form of Forward Air Controllers (FAC), troop carriers and on a limited basis, close air support. Before 1961, the Vietnamese had no system for directing or controlling air strikes. In December 1961, advisors from the 13th U.S. Air Force developed a plan for the first Tactical Air Control (TAC) system in Vietnam, to be located at Tan Son Nhut Airbase. The plan called for establishment of an Air Support Operations Center (ASOC), Air Liaison Officers (ALO) and Forward Air Controllers (FAC), manned by both USAF and VNAF personnel. The following year, an ASOC was created at Da Nang Air Base, which was assigned to I Corps combat operations, and subsequently ASOCs were also implemented in II and III Corps. Viet-

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Conboy. *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War In Laos*, New York: Paladin, 1995, 119.

namese pilots flew limited FAC support until the U.S. 19th Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS), with its twenty-two O-1F aircraft assigned, arrived in July 1963.

During June and July 1964, five Leaping Lena teams, each composed of eight Vietnamese Special Forces NCOs, parachuted into the Laotian jungle along Route 9. Immediately, the operation ran into trouble; one man died from his injuries as he attempted to rappel 120 feet from the tall trees after his chute became entangled in its thick triple-layer canopy. Several more were also seriously injured in the tree landings, robbing the teams of critical skills they'd need to survive and send back intelligence. Without American leadership and expertise on the ground, the mission was doomed to fail, and despite being warned about going into villages, most teams ignored the orders. It didn't take long for the enemy to become aware of their presence and essentially wipe them out.

A broad consensus is that the first Leaping Lena operations were disasters. Of the forty Vietnamese team members initially dropped into Laos, most were either killed or immediately captured after their insertion. Only five survivors straggled back, weeks later. Of the data gathered, little was deemed to be useable intelligence, but it had still been more than MACV had collected prior to the operation. At the least, they knew the area across the border had been saturated with the enemy, many in NVA uniforms, clear proof that the North Vietnamese were sponsoring the South's insurgency. Roads and bridges were all guarded by a minimum of two personnel, and additional roads supported huge convoys that couldn't be detected, even from the air. Several battalion-sized units were reported just inside Laos, with evidence that one had already crossed into South Vietnam near Khe Sanh. Here, a Special Forces camp would be overrun in 1968, the site of one of the war's bloodiest battle between U.S. Marines and the NVA.

An immediate search for the missing Leaping Lena team survivors was initiated. MAJ Fred Patton and MSG Robert Mattox arrived as advance party for two SF teams deployed from 1st Special Forces Group Airborne (1st SFGA), A1/111 and B1/110, on a six month TDY assignment with orders to search for the missing Leaping Lena team members. Joined by teammates from Okinawa, their intensive search failed to turn up any more of the missing Vietnamese soldiers, except for the five initial stragglers. The others who had descended into

the dark rugged jungle that fateful evening over Laos were never heard from or seen again.

After this first cross-border debacle, Leaping Lena shifted tactics and began to run Long Range Recon Patrols (LRRP), coined “Road Runners,” using solely indigenous personnel. These teams were either brave Montagnard tribesmen from the Rhade and Raglai tribes, or Chinese Nung mercenaries employed and paid with CIA funds funneled through U.S. Special Forces personnel. They were trained to emulate North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers or Viet Cong (VC), and then when inserted into hotly contested or suspected hostile territory, to run the trails, search for enemy units and gather intelligence. These teams would generally infiltrate wearing the South Vietnamese uniform, and then change into NVA or Viet Cong attire to blend in once on the ground. Since the majority of their time was actually spent within the enemy’s encampments and defensive positions, they had to be extremely dedicated and have nerves of steel to accomplish their missions.

Using indigenous personnel as Road Runners dressed as enemy combatants often presented situations, that upon reflection, seem humorous to some of the Army’s more conventional participants, such as in the following:

When 101st Airborne Division aviation elements were supporting Project Delta, a young, relatively inexperienced pilot, Bill Walker, confessed he’d nearly had to change his pants after a Road Runner team extraction. It had come soon after the loss of Gene Miller, a revered pilot and officer in the 101st Airborne Division, who along with his entire crew, perished while attempting a high overhead extraction of such a team by a hoist, the jungle penetrator. Walker had been assigned his first duty as Aircraft Commander (AC) and answered the siren, only to learn that a hoist had been put on his helicopter. He protested strenuously. He hadn’t practiced a high overhead recovery since flight school, and the news substantially added to the stress of his first maneuver under combat conditions. To compensate, they’d given him the experienced and steady Keith Boyd as his right seat. The Command & Control (C&C) ship circled nearby, directing Walker’s aircraft into a narrow opening in the jungle canopy, west of Khe Sanh, near a landmark called the “Rock Pile.” He observed several orange panels in

the tall elephant grass below, swallowed hard and nosed his vulnerable craft toward them.

“If there are six on the ground instead of five,” the C&C ship told him, “kill ‘em all.”

Walker’s stress index ratcheted up several more notches.

He dropped rapidly, hovering just beyond the treetops, amazed by the deafening sound of close combat over the noise of his rotary blades. He held the controls steady despite the gunfire streaking toward his exposed aircraft.

Through the chaos, he distinctly heard the ladder descending, mildly surprised that the crew hadn’t used the jungle hoist after all. With ground fire pecking against his chopper’s fragile skin, he heard the recon team scrambling up the ladder behind him. Finally assured everyone was aboard, Keith shouted, “We’ve got ‘em all. Go! Go!”

Walker glanced back to ensure they were, in fact ready, and it was only then that he’d profess later, “I nearly shit my pants!” His chopper was packed with Asians in full NVA combat uniforms, pith helmets with red stars and NVA web-gear. Each carried the enemy’s favorite weapon of choice, AK-47 Chi Com assault rifles. One camouflaged face stared back fiercely, then suddenly grinning, his gold teeth glistened. The grin seemed malicious and inherently evil, only adding to Walker’s growing apprehension. He had a fleeting thought, “My God! We’ve picked up the bad guys!” Briefly flirting with panic, he considered ditching his aircraft into the nearby mountainside; he was not going to the Hanoi Hilton (the North Vietnamese’s POW camp, near Hanoi). Keith quickly picked up on his friend’s hyperventilation; he hastily explained their passengers were Chinese Nung mercenaries from an obscure Special Forces operation, Project Delta.

“Hey bud, don’t have a heart attack,” Keith said, grinning widely. “Delta inserts their Road Runner teams in ARVN uniforms, but as soon as they’re on the ground, they change out of them and put on NVA uniforms. They do it so they can mix in with the enemy units and gather intelligence.”

It quickly became obvious that tactic didn’t always work as planned. That’s why they were there, extracting them from a dangerous situation.

“Why doesn’t somebody ever tell me this shit before it happens?”



Delta Road Runner in NVA attire.  
(Photo courtesy of Gary Nichols)

Walker groaned in frustration. He listened as Eddie Hester and Felis Berto keyed their mikes so he and Keith could hear them laughing on the way back to Khe Sanh.<sup>8</sup>

The Road Runner's mission was dirty, dangerous work; the most hazardous assigned to any small force of only three to four men. The U.S. Special Forces soldiers of Project Delta highly respected the Road Runners, mourning each loss as one of their own. Inexplicably, the NVA and VC frequently seemed to sense these teams as imposters, and would open fire on them without warning. No one ever determined just how the enemy knew the Road Runners didn't belong to one of their units, but the attrition rapidly

proved much too high; tactics had to be changed quickly. The Road Runners continued to operate after Leaping Lena, with at least one major adjustment: Special Forces NCOs advised them from their initial deployment in 1964 until disbanding Project Delta, in 1970.

Operation Leaping Lena concluded with less than stellar performances by Vietnamese reconnaissance personnel, but future potential was clearly evident. Planners knew that for missions of this type to succeed, Americans would have to accompany indigenous soldiers on the ground. In late 1964, the decision was made to train combined recon teams, using both VNSF and U.S. Special Forces, and to develop the capability to quickly reinforce them while in the field.

Thirsty for intelligence, commanders realized that for operations to be effective, they would need not only U.S. Special Forces troops integrated, but more muscle as backup. In July 1964, the mission subtly

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<sup>8</sup> *Lancers*, Volume 11, Issue 2, 9

shifted from being an operation, to becoming an organization, utilizing joint command of VNSF and USSF advisors from Okinawa, with command and control falling under MACV. This new composite detachment was designated B-52 (Project Delta), filled from within the Okinawa-based 1st SFGA with the most experienced, highly qualified personnel under that organization's command. A decision was made that only the best would be selected from U.S. Special Forces ranks to fill subsequent organizational vacancies. The muscle would come in the form of a reinforcement-reaction force, the 91st ARVN Airborne Ranger Battalion,<sup>9</sup> battle-hardened soldiers who had previously demonstrated they could take the fight to the enemy and hold their own if given the resources to do so. U.S. Special Forces advisors were immediately assigned to work with the Rangers, thus adding an enormous capability for calling in air and artillery support. Because of this substantially increased firepower with the addition of the Rangers, Delta forces would habitually kill more enemy soldiers than both Omega and Sigma, combined.<sup>10, 11</sup>

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The 91st Airborne Ranger Battalion and their American counterparts made significant contributions to Project Delta's overall mission throughout its tenure. In only one year, the 91st Rangers (referred throughout this book as the 81st Airborne Rangers, see footnote below) had spent on average 55% of their time in the field and accounted for 194 enemy soldiers killed in action. Project Delta personnel who had worked closely with them, praised their toughness and fighting ability.

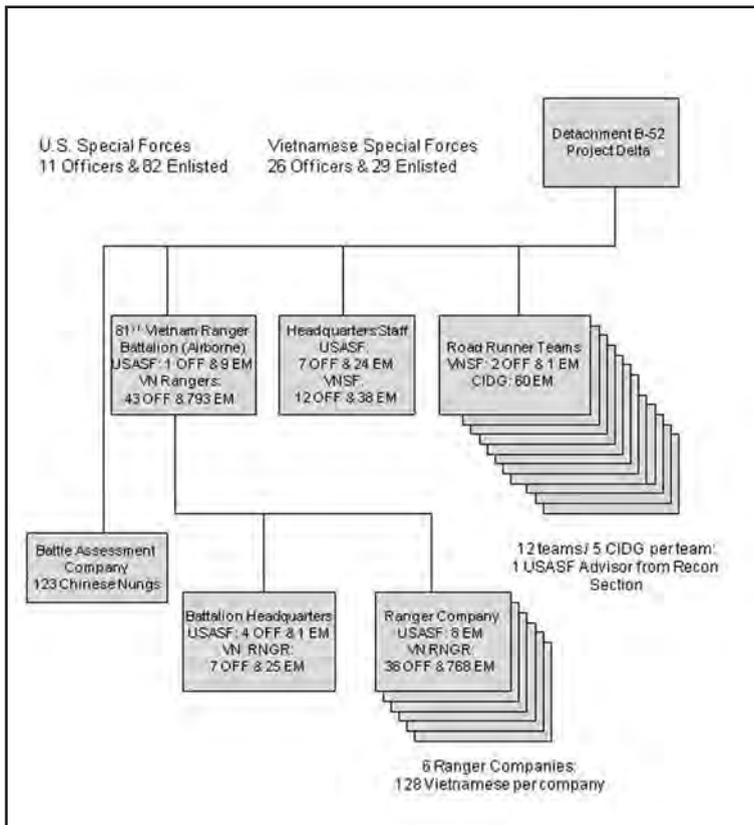
The Vietnamese soldiers on Project Delta's new recon teams, much like the Americans, all volunteered and had been selected from among the ranks of Vietnamese Special Forces to receive further intensive

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<sup>9</sup> The 91st designation for the Ranger battalion was later changed to the 81st, for unusual reasons. The Vietnamese rated everything from "Number 1" (very good), to "Number 10" (very bad). Adding the 9 and 1 (of the 91st), equals "10." To the superstitious Vietnamese and Montagnard tribesmen, the number 10 meant "very bad." Once their designation had changed to the 81st Ranger and they were issued the same M16 rifles as their U.S. counterparts, their combat performance dramatically improved.

<sup>10</sup> USSF Advisors to the 81st Airborne Ranger Battalion, Annex G11, 5th Special Forces Group Commander's Omega, Sigma and Project Delta Debriefing Report, June 66 – June 67

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*



B-52 Project Delta Organizational Chart (courtesy of U.S. Army)

training, by and with U.S. Special Forces personnel. After the initial stage of specialized training, additional training in the form of “real world” exercises began in relatively secure jungle and mountainous areas where only small units of the enemy were known to be holed up, and then progressed into areas under total control of the Viet Cong or NVA. The training of each recon team often took six months, until all were satisfied about their capability to operate effectively—accomplished by running actual combat operations against the enemy.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See “USSF Personnel on Project Delta Recon Teams, 1964 to 1970,” Annex E.