

SOG'S MOST EXCLUSIVE MEMORABILIA: SILVER PISTOL

Militaria collectors pay thousands for a SOG knife; here's the even rarer SOG pistol.

By Maj. John L. Plaster, USAR (Ret.)

Though the famed SOG knife has become the Vietnam War's most sought after Special Operations artifact -- with even reproductions commanding hundreds of dollars -- this attractive blade is not the most exclusive or valuable SOG souvenir.



Unknown except to the virtual handful of Green Beret recon team leaders who received one, is the top secret MACV-SOG's most coveted award: The Boxed Presentation Browning Hi-Power Pistol.

Officially designated the "Reconnaissance Team Leader Special Recognition Award," it was called the "Silver Pistol" in SOG recon circles. Each pistol was presented personally by Chief SOG in a Saigon ceremony, usually to recognize an especially dramatic mission, or for earning a high award such as the Medal of Honor.

It's unlikely you'll ever see these extremely rare pistols -- which have yet to appear even in a museum. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first public disclosure of their very existence.



"For having led mission Ashtray II, Chief SOG, Colonel Steve Cavanaugh, presented me with a SOG "Silver Pistol." (U.S. Army photo)

The Silver SOG Pistol

Acquired clandestinely to prevent their being traced back to the United States, SOG's weaponry included an amazing array of everything from suppressed Sten Guns to Walther automatics and even the unique Gyrojet Rocket Pistol. Our reliance upon these non-standard weapons was driven by the need for 'deniability' should team gear fall into foreign hands; like Mr. Phelps and his fictional 'Mission Impossible' force, SOG's cross-border forays could not leave behind any embarrassing

evidence.

It was this deniability requirement that caused our armory to include a goodly number of Browning 9mm Hi-Power pistols, which became SOG's favored combat sidearm. With solid steel construction and a high magazine capacity, the Browning proved rugged, reliable and effective.

Sometime in late 1968 or early 1969, SOG headquarters arranged for a small number of these clandestinely acquired Browning pistols to be chrome-plated and boxed as the "Reconnaissance Team Leader Special Recognition Award." It was a fittingly clandestine award for a fittingly clandestine project.

Each pistol is boxed in a handsome, handmade black lacquered case, lined in aquamarine blue velvet and includes an engraved brass plate with the recipient's name. But in keeping with SOG's "hush-hush" tradition, even the plate avoids using the terms "SOG" or "Special Forces," describing the recipient only as a "MACV Long Range Recon Team Leader."

However, the accompanying paperwork -- without which you could not bring it home -- necessarily identified this weapon as being in the possession of a SOG trooper. Issued complete with war trophy documents and an export license application from the U.S. Embassy, it included a citation which, like so many SOG items, makes no direct reference even to SOG's existence.

How Many Are There?

During my years in SOG, I personally knew of about a half-dozen SOG pistols being presented to fellow recon team leaders. And of these, three were given to Medal of Honor winners.

These Medal of Honor recipients -- Robert Howard, Fred Zabitoski and Franklin Miller -- were all from CCC at Kontum. The only other living SOG Medal of Honor Winner, a CCN man, Jon Cavaiani, had been a POW and was not released by Hanoi until after SOG had been disbanded, so he could not have received a Silver Pistol.



"SOG's most prized award, the "Silver Pistol," came in a special presentation case with an engraved nameplate."

In several cases, recon men did not live long enough to be presented the SOG Pistols they deserved. In fact, when I learned I was to be awarded a Silver Pistol, I was so concerned about too soon "biting the dust" that I requested an immediate presentation so I could carry it home on leave. Considering SOG's high casualty rates, it was not overly melodramatic to think you were living on borrowed time.

Still, some other team leaders received pistols, which, if you multiply this over time and take into account that recon team leaders at CCN and CCS also were presented Brownings, yields a realistic estimate of about 40 or perhaps 50 total pistols in existence.

And at least one SOG pistol is floating around because it was stolen from a former recon team leader's whole baggage en route from Germany to a stateside military post. It says a lot about how absolutely selfless Colonel Robert Howard is, that when he learned this NCO's pistol was lost, he gave him his own to replace it! (Incidentally, beyond question, Col. Howard is the most highly decorated living American, with the Medal of Honor, two Distinguished Service Crosses, the Silver Star and EIGHT purple hearts. People sometimes ask why I stayed so long in Vietnam; I reply, for the honor of knowing and fighting beside such fine soldiers as Robert Howard.)



"Hamming it up in our ambush position, I snapped this photo of Capt. Fred Krupa beside Laotian Highway 110 during Operation Ashtray II. A year later, Fred became MIA during a SOG mission; his fate remains unknown."

The Story of Mission Ashtray II

If I could cut my SOG pistol into eight pieces, I'd hand them out to my American teammates on mission Ashtray II because it was our joint effort that led to my receiving a Silver Pistol, referred to in the citation as a "brilliant POW snatch."

It was with these men -- Capt. Fred Krupa and Sergeants Rex Jaco, John Yancey, Richard Woody, Paul Kennicott, R. Michael Grace and David Galaso -- that we attempted an especially hazardous mission: Ambushing a North Vietnamese truck convoy on the heavily defended Ho Chi Minh Trail in which not merely would we destroy trucks, but seize the lead truck driver and run with him all night to escape the numerous pursuers who were certain to follow.

And such a lead truck driver was especially valuable, the intelligence analysts had determined, because he was the most captureable enemy soldier who would know the locations of hidden North Vietnamese truck parks, way stations and base camps in southern Laos -- which would, in turn, become targets for B-52 strikes. Capturing such a driver became one of SOG's highest priority missions in early 1970.

But capturing any enemy soldier near the Ho Chi Minh Trail network was easy to say and hard to do. Not only was the region so heavily patrolled that just reaching a highway was a major achievement, but the North Vietnamese reaction forces were so large that escape with a slow-moving prisoner was wrought with danger, too.

While I was home on extension leave, the first Ashtray convoy ambush and POW snatch mission was attempted. It was led by Major Frank Jaks, our S-3, who though still youthful and vigorous, had in his teenage years been an anti-Nazi partisan in Czechoslovakia. Although his hand-picked, all-U.S. team successfully reached the highway and ambushed a convoy -- destroying several trucks and inflicting heavy casualties -- they'd unintentionally killed the lead driver and came back empty handed.

The Second Ashtray Mission

Although Maj. Jaks wanted to lead a second Ashtray mission, the Joint Chiefs judged him too knowledgeable to risk his capture a second time in Laos. Therefore, so there would be an entirely new perspective, a different approach, it was decided that Ashtray II would involve a new group of men led by someone else. And much to my surprise, I was selected to be team leader.

The mission would be a joint effort of my Recon Team California and RT New Hampshire, led by Capt. Fred Krupa. Although Krupa outranked me (I was a staff

sergeant), this kind of a “most-experienced-recon-man-leads” ethic was quite common in SOG.

In addition to the four Americans on each team, we'd also bring along four Montagnard tribesmen team members, for a total joint team of 12 -- quite large since SOG recon teams usually employed only half this many men.

For three weeks we trained long and hard, worked out every last detail for the ambush, practiced drills for contact with the enemy and experimented with various demolition charges. And, of course, rehearsed that ambush over, and over, and over -- both day and night. I was an unyielding taskmaster, but everyone understood so there wasn't the slightest gripe; recall, these weren't unwilling draftees, but seasoned Special Forces soldiers with most on their second Vietnam combat tour, although several were new to SOG recon.

After briefing our plan to Chief SOG in Saigon, he insisted that we run a short, two-day recon of the area we'd flee through after the ambush, to ensure we wouldn't run right into a hidden enemy base camp. Capt. Krupa led this quick mission, which slipped in and out without incident while I finished other last-minute preparations. Two days later, our combined 12-man team was inserted by helicopter.

The Night Ambush

It took us three days of slow, silent movement to reach Highway 110, a stealthy infiltration completed in the early afternoon of 29 March 1970, the day before Easter Sunday.

After laying in thick foliage until last light and even watching one truck dare to pass by in daylight, we crept forward to the road. I emplaced three claymore mines linked together by det cord for simultaneous detonation; they were aimed in a semi-circle to focus their blast on a truck's front tire.



"Fred Krupa snapped this photo of the ambushed Soviet GAZ-63 truck note bamboo & camouflage, plus my thermite grenade on hood. Our satchel charges blew it up, creating beacon fires for directing U.S. air strikes on the many NVA that massed to pursue us."

Then we laid face-down beside the highway and waited. Just before 10 p.m., the sound of approaching truck engines grew ever gradually until they seemed to roar like an approaching diesel locomotive -- then finally, one rolled exactly up to where the three claymores were pointing and "KA-BOOM!" -- I blew the mines and as fast, Yancey, Krupa, Woody and I assaulted the Soviet-made GAZ-63 truck which had lurched to a stop in front of us.

Virtually in three seconds, Yancey had the driver jerked from the cab and on the ground while Krupa slid a plastic restraint on his wrists.

I'll never forget the amazing vision of Fred Krupa with his Kodak Instamatic and flash cubes standing in the middle of the notorious Ho Chi Minh Trail, flashing away as I tossed a satchel charge in a truck and placed a time-delay thermite grenade on its hood. Seconds later, I shouted the order to withdraw, which Woody backed up with a whistle, just as we'd rehearsed -- then a hidden enemy soldier shot Woody, bad, through both arms. Rex Jaco took hold of Woody and led him back toward the rally point and Krupa and Yancey dragged away the enemy prisoner.

By process of elimination, that left only me at the truck, so I began exchanging fire with several enemy soldiers to buy time for everyone to get together at the rally point. Meanwhile, our other men were igniting time fuzes for more than 40 assorted claymore mines and grenades which would create a sort of mine field behind us that would cookoff for some 45 minutes, confusing and delaying the many North Vietnamese soldiers converging on the ambush site.

At the rally point, Galaso -- who was an SF medic -- patched Woody up as best he could. And Woody, despite his great pain (both his forearms had been shattered by AK bullets), refused morphine for fear it would slow us down. He was a tough man.

One of the Montagnards, meanwhile, was missing. We could not wait or look for him; we had to get out of there immediately.



Behind blindfolded prisoner, John Yancy & (in hat), Dave Galaso, in Kontum, South Vietnam. One of Delta Force's earliest commandos, John made the 1980 hostage rescue attempt in Iran, then was killed in a training accident at Ft. Bragg. (Photo-Frank Greco)

We ran through that pitch-black jungle most of the night, pausing only to treat Woody or check the prisoner's restraints. After about an hour, a special Forward Air Controller arrived overhead with, as he promised us, "unlimited air." Therefore, with the flames of burning trucks perfectly flickering a beacon for U.S. fighters, continuous bombs fell around the ambush site until just before dawn.

Shortly after daylight, Hueys from the 57th Assault Helicopter Company arrived overhead, escorted by Cobra gunships from the 361st Attack Helicopter Company. Then a pair of A-1 Skyraiders put in cluster bombs right across us, but somehow we weren't hit.

And in a moment, the Hueys swooped in and we were gone -- we'd made it out. The missing Montagnard was found by a SOG helicopter a day later and safely retrieved.

And Off to Saigon

After our tumultuous welcome on the CCC helipad, I barely had time to drop off my gear in the RT California team room when the recon first sergeant told me a SOG "Blackbird" C-130 had been diverted from another mission and would arrive in ten minutes to transport the prisoner and myself to Saigon. Piloted by Chinese civilians, these unmarked SOG C-130s were equipped with the Fulton "Skyhook" Recovery System and state-of-the-art electronic warfare gear.



Sure enough, ten minutes later a Blackbird arrived and I led the hog-tied truck driver aboard. We were the only passengers. But because this was all impromptu, the Chinese pilot landed at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut civilian terminal instead of the more out-of-the-way Air America ramp.

Still unshaven with traces of camouflage stick smeared across my face, I walked the handcuffed North Vietnamese prisoner across the tarmac; once he'd seen the amazing reality of a bustling, modern airport, he started to get a bit antsy. To help settle his nerves and re-establish perspective, I put the muzzle of my .45 automatic to his right temple and held it there as we ambled the 100 yards to the less conspicuous military terminal. This therapy proved instantly effective and calmed him right down.

I shall always recall the aghast faces of USAF and rear echelon Army types at that terminal, who took one glance at the approaching haggard Sfer with a .45 auto pressed to his hog-tied captive, then suddenly remembered they had to go somewhere else. Despite some 50 U.S. personnel around us, not a one attempted to make smalltalk during the ten minutes we waited for a SOG unmarked commercial van to arrive and take us away.

Afterward I began to thirst mightily for a cold beer, then I learned the SOG deputy chief, Col. Ross Franklin, and I had a most important appointment: General Creighton Abrams, commander of all U.S. forces in Vietnam, wanted to see us.

I hurriedly donned a fresh set of jungle fatigues and rushed to a barbershop for a shave and haircut with a SOG sergeant major escorting me to ensure I didn't find that cold beer.

That evening we traveled to MACV headquarters where we briefed Gen. Abrams on mission Ashtray II. Afterward, Gen. Abrams' kind words surprised me, for his public reputation was rabidly anti-SF -- remember, this was the man who'd had the 5th Special Forces Group commander, Col. Robert Rhealt, arrested and charged with the murder of a Vietnamese double-agent a year earlier. But I must give the old general credit for putting aside philosophical differences and paying compliments to Special Forces and

SOG at the end of our briefing. When Abrams shook my hand and asked that I congratulate all my men, he sincerely meant it.

It was a hell of a day: Deep in Laos and evading enemy pursuers in pre-dawn darkness, and by dusk, face-to-face in Saigon with the Commander of U.S. forces. And an hour later, in an air conditioned bar no less, I beheld more beer than I could possibly consume. What a country! My only regret was that I was not among my Ashtray II ambusher comrades celebrating that night, though I lifted my glass in salute to them all.



My most valued souvenirs: A SOG "Silver Pistol," a SOG Recon Knife, & a wrist compass given me by teammate George Bacon III. A veteran CIA officer, in 1976 George was killed by Cuban troops while attempting to demolish a bridge in Angola.

Epilogue: The Men of Ashtray II

What became of the eight Americans from Operation Ashtray II is an accurate, microcosmic indicator of the great dangers SOG men faced.

Severely shot through both arms during the convoy ambush, Richard Woody was stabilized at a hospital in Vietnam, then medevaced back to the states. He fully recovered.

Although Paul Kennicott came through our ambush unscathed, he was badly wounded almost a year later while reconning about five miles east of where we'd ambushed that night convoy. He, too, was medevaced stateside.

John Yancey, who dragged our enemy prisoner from the truck and led him through the jungle that long, dark night, later received the Distinguished Service Cross for another recon mission, in which he single-handedly defended a fallen comrade who had been too badly wounded to walk. Although the man died, John courageously held off enemy attackers for more than an hour until a relief force could arrive. I think he deserved the Medal of Honor. One of Delta Force's earliest counter-terrorists, John was at Desert One in Iran in 1980 during the failed hostage rescue attempt; then, due to another Delta Force trooper's human error, John was killed in a live-fire training exercise in 1989. We all miss him a lot.

Slightly more than a year after Ashtray II, Fred Krupa was leading a company-size SOG raiding force on the Cambodian border when he fell from a hovering helicopter after being hit by an AK round. I was there, directly overhead in a USAF O2A Forward Air Control aircraft, and although we put in many air strikes and tried to launch a rescue mission, we never got Fred back. He is MIA to this day. God bless him.

The rest of us, at last count, were still alive.